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IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FACTORS INFLUENCING WORK AND LIFE BALANCE

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Work-life balance (WLB) has gained noticeable attention amid the pandemic. Yet before the outbreak of COVID-19, the increasing pace of life encouraged investigations into individual and organisational aspects of WLB. Physically and mentally healthy people help society develop and grow, whilst health issues caused by work-life imbalance lead to dissatisfaction with work and life. This discontent results in stress and stress-related illnesses, such as burnout. From the organisational point of view, WLB is a factor in the efficiency of an enterprise. Intentional or unintentional absence, high employee turnover, low productivity, higher insurance costs, and low job satisfaction are amongst the consequences of work-life imbalance. WLB has also been examined as part of employer branding, which is coming to the fore as shortage of labour prompts organisations to look for strategies for attracting and retaining employees.

This paper carries out content analysis to provide a theoretical framework for WLB and job satisfaction. It also offers a review of the literature on individual and organisational factors in WLB. Both groups of factors are found to be critical. These are job involvement, tenure, workload and scheduling, organisational culture (leadership, recreational opportunities, flexibility, supervisor support, autonomy, boundary management, alternative working methods etc.), occupational stress, and salary. In diverse fields, these factors have different weight.

Keywords: job satisfaction, work-life balance, factors, burnout, employer branding

Introduction

In the past decade, people have been embracing the values of sustainable actions in business and private lives. Sustainable societies are defined as operating within the ecological limits of nature while living outside them. The resultant tension causes problems for the environment and every living being. Work-life balance is a prerequisite for a sustainable society where humans are part of nature and stay within the ecological limits.

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The topicality of work-life balance has been growing. The fast pace of life and the multiple roles each individual has to play have raised the bar enormously. Even a healthy individual cannot be brilliant in all areas, and more and more people are experiencing the consequences of work-life imbalance. This imbalance results, in its turn, in dissatisfaction with work and life; it leads to greater stress levels and stress-related illnesses. In severe cases, burnout, anxiety and depression are possible. In extreme ones, pressure at work leads to *karoshi* — a phenomenon first registered in the 1970s in Japan. *Karoshi* means ‘overwork death’, which happens after too many hours at work have caused physical and mental devastation [1, pp. 209–216; 2, pp. 625–641].

The employer does not bear sole responsibility for the work-life balance of its employees. Of course, one must take care of his or her health. Nevertheless, the workplace has a role in balancing life as well. Although employers may think that it is not their problem or something they can influence, this is not true. Furthermore, work-life balance is a relevant factor in analysing the efficiency of an enterprise. WLB imbalance may cause intentional or unintentional absence, high employee turnover, low productivity, higher insurance costs, low job satisfaction, etc. Employers have understood that to attract talents and retain them, they have to think about how potential and existing employees see their company. Thus, an effective employer brand is a must. It has been shown that employees are distressed by conflicts of values at work, and such clashes are likely to increase burnout symptoms [3, pp. 91–134].

Local and international organisations have an interest in this issue. Statistical data from several institutions confirm that the disturbing trend continues. The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), which has been carried out four times in the past 16 years by the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*, also confirms the persistent trend. The EQLS attributes the situation to growing workloads, stricter requirements, and the increasing speed of life. Undeniably, the balance between work and private life is the responsibility of an individual. Yet many aspects depend on the employer and its conscious approach to the employees.

This paper aims to explore existing studies of factors affecting work-life balance to reconstruct a theoretical framework. Content analysis is performed to attain this aim.

Methods

The theoretical framework for work-life balance was reconstructed using content analysis. This method was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, there are few literature reviews on work-life balance. Most papers look at individual industries, companies, and countries to identify the main factors under the given circumstances. Secondly, future empirical research necessitates understanding the current theoretical framework.

The Primo Discovery tool was used to search across about 30 scientific paper databases, including Web of Science, Ebsco, Emerald, JSTOR, Science Direct, and others. Search by keywords ‘work-life balance’ and ‘influencing factors’ was performed to understand the scope of the research results. Primo Discovery returned about 370,000 articles with the keywords. Then, the search was narrowed down to articles from top-quality reviewed journals, and 53,000 papers were obtained. Books and chapters from books were excluded from the results, which were further filtered to include only those research articles that focused specifically on work-life balance. This operation significantly reduced the number of papers. Then, only the contributions that identified industry-specific factors were selected since the aim of the article was to provide a general overview of a theoretical framework for factors influencing work-life balance. Finally, 21 research papers were chosen, six of which were considered principal because they reported conflicting findings. The principal papers, all written in the past decade, concentrate on different industries and diverse approaches.

Defining work-life balance

Researchers use several terms to refer to work-life balance. Greenhaus et al. [4, pp. 510–531], Frone [5, pp. 143–162], and Clark [6, pp. 747–770] employ the term work-family balance, whilst Clarke et al. [7, pp. 121–140] prefer work-family fit. Burke, when investigating organisational values in the context of work-life balance [8, pp. 81–87], uses the term work-personal life balance. Grady et al. [9, pp. 158–167] refer to the phenomenon as work-life balance. Work-family balance is often associated with traditional families, i. e. the married-with-children model. Since this study considers households of all types, it will use the term work-life balance to avoid misunderstandings. Work-life balance is a topic widely researched across many fields — management, psychology, sociology, and particularly human resource management.

Clark defines work-life balance as satisfaction and good functioning at work and home, with a minimum of role conflict [6, pp. 747–770]. Clarke et al. [7, pp. 121–140] state that work-life balance (WLB) is maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life, whilst other scholars [4, pp. 510–531] define WLB as the amount of time and the degree of satisfaction with the work and family roles.

I believe that work-life balance should be measured and defined both objectively and subjectively. A subjective measure of work-life balance is personal opinions about work-life balance and its diverse aspects. Objective measures are the physical or mental manifestations of work-life imbalance or burnout [10, pp. 7–25]. Probably, it is best to deal with an objective indicator of work-life balance, which requires detecting and measuring physical and mental imbal-

ance symptoms such as excessive emotional and physical fatigue, irritability, and inability to perform or take on new responsibilities. Sometimes, only one aspect is taken into account when diagnosing burnout. For example, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) focuses solely on the energy dimension, which is essentially assessed based on the answer to the question ‘How often have you been emotionally exhausted?’ [10, pp. 7–25]. However, future research will require a set of professional burnout symptoms to evaluate the level of work-life imbalance.

At the organisational level, work-life balance is a factor affecting intentional or unintentional absence at work, high employee turnover, low productivity, higher insurance costs, low job satisfaction, and other negative consequences causing losses and reducing efficiency. It seems essential to identify the main factors leading to imbalance on the part of employees. Work-life balance is vital for the performance of an organisation, individual well-being, and the functioning of society [9, pp. 158–167].

Several studies look for the main factors in work-life imbalance. Work-life balance and job satisfaction have been shown responsible for employee performance. There is a positive correlation for both [11, pp. 76–81], and in most studies, these factors co-occur. Investigations into work-life balance and job satisfaction are numerous. Although there is still a discussion going on, most researchers agree that work-life balance is a set of internal factors affecting overall job satisfaction [12, pp. 71–80].

Results and Discussion

Thimmapuram et al. distinguish several factors influencing WLB in physicians. The principal ones are **workload, workflow, and scheduling**. In particular, respondents surveyed by the authors complained that there were not enough staff to cover the workload. They also said that they sometimes had to do some work at home because they had no time for it during shifts due to urgent tasks. Some told the researchers that most of their work did not require a medical degree, and they felt that inappropriate work planning led to a waste of their professional competencies. Although Thimmapuram et al. focus on the medical profession, their findings may be extrapolated to other industries to analyse WLB, job satisfaction, motivation to work, and loyalty to the company [13]. The study [13] also examines the effect of **leadership and administration** on WLB. Respondents reported that some workplace rules and initiatives were not evidence-based and thus not effective. They also expressed a wish for leadership built on trust and appreciation of employees. A lack of respect from management for the private time of employees was another issue mentioned by respondents. In particular, they spoke

against meetings, training sessions, or obligatory events outside regular working hours while supporting the idea that management should encourage employees to take holidays to stay fit for work. Another factor discussed in the survey was **recreational facilities** such as rooms for relaxation and meditation. Respondents also mentioned employee empowerment, work-life flexibility, and opportunities to take care of their mental health as desirable workplace elements. In my opinion, although some of the factors may seem industry-specific, all of them are significant to individuals regardless of occupation. In the research in question, most respondents (~60%) experienced moderate or severe burnout symptoms, which are a serious indicator of work-life imbalance [13, pp. 1–8]. Perhaps, the study by Thimmapuram et al. would have benefitted from examining the role of organisational culture. Another shortcoming is that it fails to estimate the role of values in work-life balance.

An industry-specific investigation was conducted in India in 2017. Its authors explore the influence of **occupational stress** on the work-life balance of teaching professionals. In the case of educators, occupational stress is a product of different factors, viz. **role conflicts, role ambiguity, unreasonable group and political pressure, powerlessness, poor peer relationships, and strenuous working conditions** [14, pp. 357–361]. The study leads one to conclude that occupational stress factors differ across fields of employment and depend on the cultural and political environment in a country or organisation. All this holds for India as well.

Helmle et al. tried to demonstrate a connection between **perceived work-life conflict** and the personal experience of work-life balance. The work concentrates on copreneurial firms — a type of family business within which a couple build personal and work relationships. The authors study the connection **between job involvement, spousal support, and the role of communicating about home at work** and vice versa. The findings show that job involvement reinforces work-life imbalance, whilst flexibility is positively related to WLB. Although spousal support has been considered a major factor in some investigations, Helmle et al. do not confirm a significant correlation between this phenomenon and WLB. **Communication**, however, is recognised as an important factor [15, pp. 110–132].

Grant et al. explore factors affecting the work-life balance of a remote e-worker. Many studies have emphasised the importance of **flexible working hours** and **remote working** in ensuring a healthy work-life balance. While technology provides a spatial link between the work and home environments, flexitime and flexiplace working blurs boundaries between them. The authors write: ‘Whilst e-working has been shown to have some positive effects, particularly for work-life balance, improvements in productivity and reduced stress levels, plus positive environmental impacts, there are some aspects which can be considered to

be negative' [16, pp. 527–546]. Maintaining a work-life balance seems to be a mutual responsibility of the employer and the employee. Employees must make informed choices and take rational actions, while the employer must respect working hours and the private space to maintain a reasonable work-life balance. The International Labour Organisation ('An employers' guide on working from home in response to the outbreak of COVID-19') identifies WLB as a chief concern amid the pandemic, when remote work is done simultaneously with taking care of children, helping them to do their home assignments, and performing other responsibilities.

Kossek et al. [17, pp. 347–367] have surveyed 245 teleworking professionals. The researchers focused on the perception of **boundary management** strategies and work control. They concluded that people who had drawn a line between work and family to control where and when they worked fared better. In a more recent study, Kossek et al. propose a person-centred theory of boundary management at work. They prove that individuals have different styles when managing boundaries between work and family. Some participants in the study reported a preference for integrating work and family, others tried to divide time between the two, whilst some chose a mixed strategy. The contribution by Kossek et al. and similar studies have considerable importance because they show how individuals can self-manage and how supervisors can identify individuals at risk [18, pp. 112–128]. At the same time, they demonstrate that there is most probably no universal approach to managing work and private life. Thus, whichever way is chosen to tackle the problem, it has to focus on the values and individual well-being.

Grant et al. argue that e-working enables integrating work and non-working lives. Home relationships can improve by increased contact, whilst remote working and flexible hours help interact across time zones. Teleworking means fewer days lost to absenteeism. It is also associated with lower stress levels because of less travel and fewer child-care issues. The authors emphasise that e-working may make one feel like one's 'own boss' and increase a sense of confidence and ability. Other studies have also confirmed the importance of feeling autonomous. On the negative side, e-working may limit social interaction with colleagues and result in unlimited working hours due to easy access to work [16, pp. 527–546]

An investigation conducted in the United States evaluates the relationship between WLB and job-related factors. The authors measure **supervisor support, organisational support, job satisfaction, job value, and the relation between socio-demographic variables** and WLB. The findings show that reasonable working hours, income, organisational support, and job value have a statistically significant relationship with WLB. When appreciation for work value increases,

respondents tend to see their work-life balance as optimum. The study stresses that values shared by the organisation and the individual raise the perceived value of work. Yet, the research disproves the assumption that supervisor support is crucial to maintaining an optimum WLB. Out of all factors, job value has the largest impact, which is nearly 1.5 times that of organisational support, followed by income and work time. The overall model explains 48% of the variance in WLB; this seems to be a considerably large proportion. The authors performed three regression equations to demonstrate the mediating effect of work-life balance and job satisfaction. The study results show that WLB partially mediated the relationship between two job-related variables — organisational support and job value. The same holds for job satisfaction [19, pp. 1447–1454].

Autonomy has received attention from scholars as a factor in WLB. Machuca et al. explore it in their 2016 work. They look into the relationship between **organisational pride**, **job satisfaction**, and **autonomy**, on the one hand, and work-life balance, on the other. A survey was carried out, and 374 responses were obtained to verify the correlation between the variables. The results confirm the hypothesised relationship between autonomy and work-life balance. They also show that supervisor WLB support is positively related to employee work-life balance [20, pp. 586–602]. Work-life balance, among other things, affects employees' attitudes, behaviours, and well-being. It also has an impact on organisational effectiveness [21, pp.124–197]. These findings have motivated companies to incorporate new forms of management to ensure social and supervisor support. Another factor strongly linked to work-life balance is organisational pride, which means enthusiasm, creativity, and a firmer commitment to customer service. Employees who are proud to work in their company are likely to be satisfied with their jobs and loyal to the employer [22, pp. 594–613, 23, pp. 351–360]. I believe that job value, which has been extensively researched as a factor in WLB, is very similar to organisational pride, and both are linked to values shared by an individual and the organisation. Thus, it seems essential to evaluate the person-organisation fit when looking for new employees so that an optimum WLB is achieved and job satisfaction and loyalty ensured.

Reviewing existing research (Fig. 1) and trying to understand factors influencing WLB on the part of individuals made it possible to suggest a model. Different colours indicate factors detected in the principal papers. Six colours were used to designate six articles. The articles identify diverse WLB factors; this suggests that work-life imbalance has been approached creatively and from several angles.

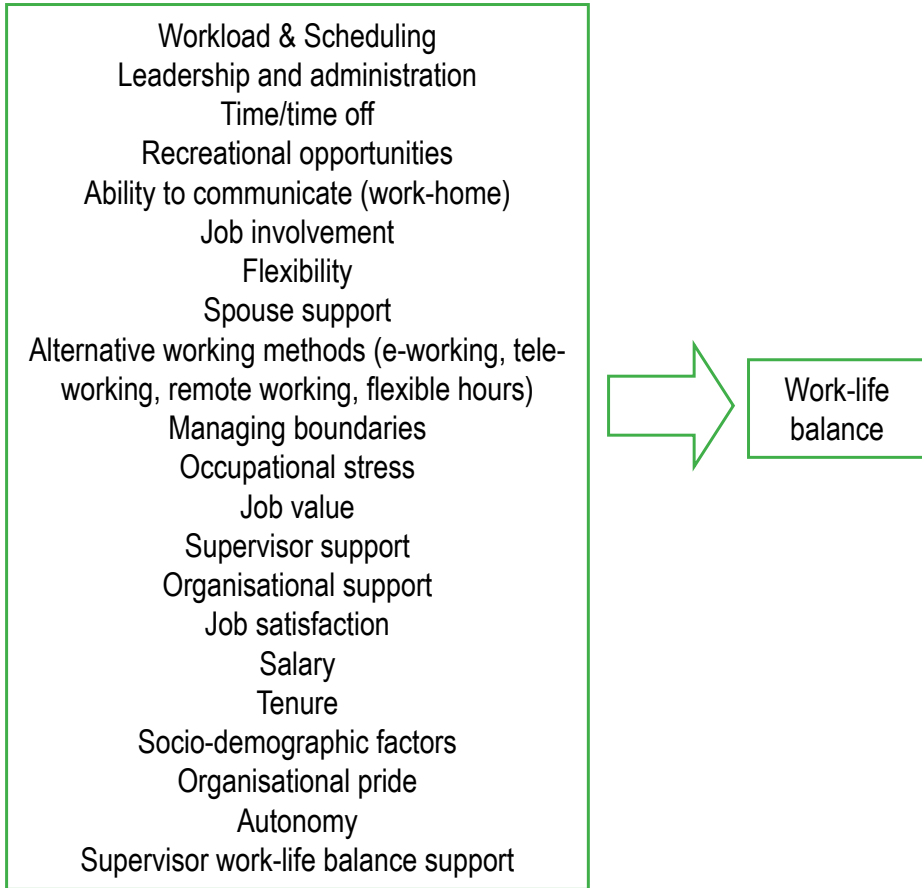


Fig. 1. Compilation of research on factors influencing work-life balance

Source: Prepared by the author based on [13; 14; 15; 16; 19; 20].

The WLB factors were divided into two groups — individual and organisational (Fig. 2); similar ones were united into larger groups. For example, leadership style, flexibility, supervisor support, and autonomy comprise the group dependent on organisational culture. An organisation whose culture places the human being at its core should be capable of minimising many threats influencing WLB.

Distinguishing between factors influenced by the employee and by the employer seems essential in delineating the areas of responsibility. A substantial element in solving the work-life balance problem is open communication between the employee and the employer, which is impossible without a person-centred organisational culture. The latter is obviously the responsibility of the employer.

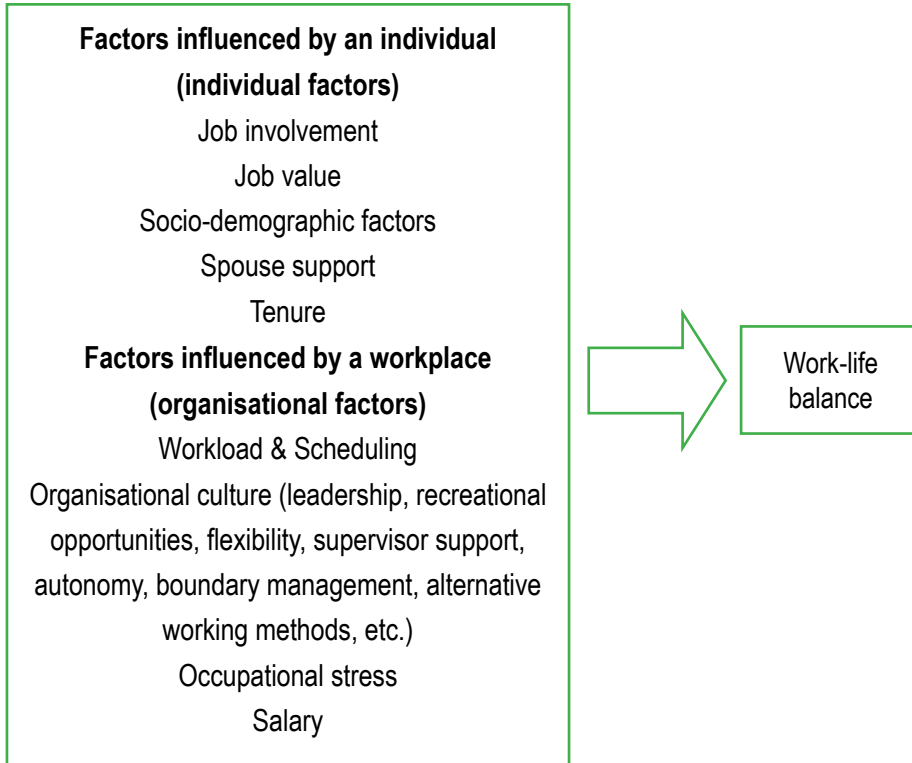


Fig. 2. Segmentation of factors influencing work-life balance

Source: Prepared by the author based on [13; 14; 15; 16; 19; 20].

Conclusions

Although there is abundant literature on work-life balance and the topicality of the issue is still growing, a model fully accounting for factors affecting an individual's work-life balance is still lacking. This research has shown that factors influencing work-life balance are complex. Thus, there cannot be a single success strategy for organisations operating in different environments. Fig. 1 demonstrates that there are many factors in WLB and that the issue has to be looked at from several perspectives depending on the environment, the industry, the individual's stage of life, personal traits, and probably the culture. For example, a hospital will have needs and options to sustain balance different from those of a fintech company, a logistics company, or a school. Despite the need for further research and investigation, it was possible to divide the factors into two groups (Fig. 2) to show the main routes to individual work-life balance. These routes are found at both organisational and individual levels. I am convinced that employees must take responsibility for achieving and sustain-

ing well-being. Nonetheless, the social or economic situation may complicate this process, making individuals endure unpleasant consequences. Sometimes individuals are ignorant of their mental and physical health condition and do nothing to change the situation at either the individual or organisational level. Of course, organisations must protect their employees from burnout or other consequences of work-life imbalance. Moreover, the values and organisational culture of the employer must be focused on well-being, sustainability, and the human being to create an environment that can secure a long-term employer-employee relationship.

Future investigations may focus on factors identified as principal in earlier studies. These include values shared by the organisation and the individual as factors in job value and organisational pride. There is also room for analysing factors affecting the choice of a particular employer by employees, as well as for exploring the employer brand as an element in attracting and retaining the best employees. Further work is required to investigate the influence of demographic factors on WLB, such as gender and generational differences. This exploration may yield unexpected results if conducted in several cultural environments since age and gender are perceived differently depending on the culture.

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