
AN OVERVIEW OF WORK- LIFE BALANCE PROGRAMMES IN UNITED STATES, UNITED KINGDOM AND INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Work-life balance is gaining increasing importance and considered to be the most important challenges encountered in the field of Human Resource Management. With the advent of technology, increase in the complexity of work, change in the values and attitudes of the young and energetic work force are some of the factors that compel us to address the work-life balance issue and hence Work-life balance has become one of the foremost work-place issue. To meet the employees' changing needs, to comply with Government regulations, and to fulfill the broader objective of corporate social responsibility, employers across the world provide several work-life initiatives/ policies and programmes. This article discuss about the various Work-Life Balance Initiatives/Programmes available to employees in United States, United Kingdom and India.

Key Words: Work-Life Balance, Work-Life Balance Initiatives/ Programmes

INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance issues have been particularly strong in developed countries where they are pushed high on political agenda. But this problem is not expressed to the equal level in developing countries (Catherine Hein, 2005). Today's employees place more emphasis on quality of working life and seek greater flexibility in their work so that they will be able to manage both work commitments and personal life. Several surveys conducted among graduates and job seekers found that work-life balance is the key in choosing an

employer and it is the number one factor of job attraction and retention. Erratic work hours, more work pressure and lack of policies that support work-life balance results in work-life imbalance (Grady & McCarthy; 2008). The adverse effects of work-life imbalance include deterioration in psychological and physical health. It negatively affects well being, family satisfaction, quality of work life and quality of life. From the organisation's side, the negative effects include decline in productivity, reduced organizational commitment, increased turnover intentions and turnover.

Work-Life Balance

Even though work-life balance is a popular and frequently used term among corporate as well as academicians, it is not concretely defined as there is no standard definition for the term. Clark (2000) defines it as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict”. Guest (2002) views work-life balance as “a perceived balance between work and the rest of life”. Similarly, Kirchmeyer views a balanced life as “achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains, and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains” (Kirchmeyer, 2000) We can understand that work-life balance is a state of equilibrium where an individual will perceive that the roles he plays in the major spheres of his life are compatible with each other.

Work-life Programmes

Work-life programmes include any organizational program or officially sanctioned practices designed to assist employees with the integration of paid work with other important life roles such as family, education, or leisure. These programmes include flexible work arrangements, child care and elder care arrangements, family leave policies and other employee assistance and wellness programmes. Work-life programmes help people who are responsible for the care of elderly parents, people who have study commitments, or people with other personal and lifestyle commitments. Employers across the world started implementing human resource practices and policies that help an individual to strike a balance between work life and family life.

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In the first session of the International Labour conference held in 1919, ILO adopted Maternity protection Convention (No.3), to protect the women employees. Later in 1965, it has adopted a recommendation on workers with family responsibilities. Subsequently in 1981, ILO adopted Workers with family responsibilities Convention (No.156) and the workers with family responsibilities Recommendation, 1981(No.165), to safeguard the interests of men and women employees with family responsibilities. The provisions of this convention make it the responsibility of the employer, to take all steps that will support the workers with family responsibilities to enter, participate and advance in the employment. The employers of the member countries who have ratified this convention are required to make flexible work arrangements, child care and elder care arrangements to employees with family responsibilities to facilitate continuation of employment. Work-life programmes in the United States, U.K and India are discussed below in detail:-

Work-Life Balance Programs in United States

Work-life balance programs are becoming in very popular in United States. Many employers have invested in a variety of policies and benefits that support employees in balancing work and family responsibilities. Even though United States and United Kingdom are interested in work-life balance programs, they vary in their approach regarding its implementation. The Government involvement is minimal in U.S. and the employers take major responsibility in the provision of Work-life balance programs. There are not much federal policies relating to work-life programs. The companies take much interest as they believe that such programmes offer them a competitive advantage and boost their image as a best employer aiding in recruitment and retention. Some of the measures taken by U.S. companies include Flexi-time, Telecommuting, Child care, Elder care, Leaves (e.g. maternity, paternity, etc.), Job-sharing, Employee Assistance Programs, In-house store/services, Gym subsidies, Vacation and work hours.

- **Work Hours:** America currently legally limits non-exempt workers from working more than 40 hours a week. Working hours vary between 35 and 48.
- **Maternity Leave:** Family and Medical Leave Act made family leave as a statutory right of employees in America. The current minimum in the U.S. is 12 weeks.
- **Childcare:** In-house child care facilities, after school programs, subsidized child care, and referral services are provided to help employees care for their children.

- **Vacation:** There is no significant legislation relating to vacation in U.S.A. Most of the companies provide 2 weeks to new employees and the length of the vacation varies according to the length of the service.
- **Telecommuting:** Telecommuting is allowed to with a view to reducing the employees commuting time, and to make their schedule more flexible. Many U.S. firms provide the option of telecommuting.

Work-Life Balance Programs in United Kingdom

The European Union countries differ from U.S. regarding its perspective about work-life balance programmes. Most of the programmes are born out of the government legislation and are mandatory. Work-life programmes are considered as social responsibility rather than competitive advantage in European Union. The countries in the European Union enforce more stringent laws and compel the employers regarding the implementation of work-life programs such as vacation, maternity leave, paternity leave, flexible work arrangements, telecommuting, etc.

The countries within European Union vary in their approach based on their culture and work values. But the European Union has laid down several guidelines, and recommended several policies for its member countries to establish uniformity with respect to work-life programmes. Some of the common work-life programs in the United Kingdom are as follows:

- **Work Hours:** The working Time (Amendment) Regulations 2002 restricts the working hours to 48 hours. But hours of work among the EU countries vary.
- **Maternity Leave:** Women are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave in United Kingdom.
- **Paternity Leave:** Two weeks' paid paternity leave is provided in U.K since 2003.
- **Vacation:** Initially as per Holiday and Pay Convention, 1970(No.132), annual leave for 3 working weeks was provided in E.U. Four to five weeks of vacation is currently provided in U.K
- **Childcare:** With the objective of promoting equal opportunity to men and women in the labour force, child care provision is given priority in Europe. Childcare subsidies are available throughout the EU, but the cost of childcare remains highest in U.K.

- **Flexible work arrangements:** The Employment Act, 2002 gives the right to employees to request flexible work arrangements like flexi time, job sharing, compressed hours, annualized hours, school hours working, term-time working and working from home.
- **Telecommuting:** Telecommuting is popular in almost all the European Union countries.

Work-Life Balance Programmes in India

The economic liberalization and the resultant inflow of foreign direct investment and foreign institutional investment contributed to the growth of Indian economy. India is an attractive destination, for many multi national corporations, because of its highly talented and young work force. The companies in India have realized that they are required to adopt strategic human resources practices similar to western countries.

Like other parts of the world, women are entering into the work force at unprecedented rates. Numbers of dual income families are steadily growing. It's high time to the companies in India to wake up to the needs of the work force. Many employers in India have started to study the impact of female employees' entry into the work force. Additional organizational support in the form of flexible work arrangements, child care, elder care and family leave policies is required to have competitive advantage. The report of the committee on the status of women in India revealed the fact that, despite the laws and International Labour Organization's Convention, maternity and child care benefits were available to only 3-5% of Indian women employees in the organized sector. Most of the Indian organizations are characterized by inflexible employment practices, with less attention paid to child care and elder care needs of the employees.(Catherine Hein ,2005)

India is yet to ratify the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No.156), 1981. But some practices in line with its recommendations are followed in Indian Government like Maternity Leave, Dual Career Planning, common posting transfers and so on. Indian Companies both in the Public and Private Sector provide Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave, Emergency Leave, and Annual Leave. Some companies even provide career break. Part-time work, working from home, flexible working hours is also practiced in some organizations. In line with the Maternity

Protection Convention(Revised(No.103)1952), Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is enacted in India, According to which 12 weeks maternity leave and two nursing breaks (till the child becomes 15 months old) are provided.

Flexi-working has become a common practice for Multi National Firms in India, With MNCs adopting global best practices in HR. But the domestic and Non-IT firms are yet to adopt such practices. Few Non-IT companies like Procter & Gamble, Hindustan Unilever are practicing flexible work arrangements. For example Procter & Gamble has introduced “Work-from-home”, where an employee can work from his residence for a maximum of 2 days in a week. HUL also has work-from-home option apart from the special leave entitlements; sabbatical and career break up to 5 years.

In India the family is regarded as part of the private domain and there is reluctance for policy to intervene in family matters. There is minimal state childcare provision, placing the burden on companies to provide the services for their employees. The cost of the child care is usually not borne by the employers. Child care related insurance coverage typically found in Europe and U.S does not exist in India currently.

CONCLUSION

This paper primarily focuses on Work life Balance programmes provided to support employees in United States, United kingdom and India. Working women in India expect more support from their employer in matters relating to child care. The companies which are able to implement such strategy will definitely gain enormous competitive advantages for the recruitment and retention of educated and trained employees, especially women. India can learn a lot from U.K and U.S.A regarding the work-life balance programmes. Indian Companies should change their traditional views regarding work-life balance policies and programmes. Work-life balance is not something that just happens. It involves the efforts of a number of partners: the employee, the organization for which the employee works, the family with whom the employee lives, and the society in which all are embedded. It involves mutual understanding and respect between all of these players.

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