
The Importance of Work Life Balance for Contemporary Management and Public Policies

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to show the importance of the developing idea of Work Life Balance for contemporary management and public policies. The article tries to develop recommendations for employers and public authorities.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The analysis was based on a literature review and an analysis of the results of nationwide questionnaire surveys conducted on a group of over 10,300 working parents using the CAWI method.

Findings: The article presents the directions of changes that should be made in the area of management and public policies in a changing environment, especially in times of developing remote work and increasing care for achieving harmony between professional and private life among the next generations entering the labor market. Parents are a special group who require an analysis of their needs and instruments (tools) that can meet their needs. Employees bringing up children from employers, apart from the attractive remuneration system, taking into account various types of subsidies for health care, entertainment, sports, and recreation, expect flexible working hours and remote work opportunities. From public authorities, first of all, the implementation of regulations facilitates the reconciliation of professional and private life and the development of institutional care for children.

Practical Implications: The analysis of employees' expectations has shown the importance of the WLB idea for modern management, and in particular it has made it possible to present recommendations to employers, people managing organizations and public authorities. The article outlines the desired directions of changes in these areas.

Originality/Value: The subject of work-life balance is of interest to many fields and scientific disciplines. There are no studies in the literature that, based on the results of the research, would present recommendations for organizations and their managers and at the same time indicate the directions of activities for public authorities.

Keywords: Human resources management, work-life balance, public policy, post-COVID-19 pandemic, working parents, family policy.

JEL codes: H41, J53, J58, M12.

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1. Introduction

The subject of work-life balance is widely described in the literature from the point of view of many fields of science. It has a special place in management and in the science of politics and administration, and especially in the activities of public authorities. On the one hand, various organizations perceive the need to pay attention to the needs of employees in many dimensions, on the other hand, society expects certain norms and boundaries in the field of legal provisions, as well as activities aimed at the needs of various groups of working people.

The focus on the problem of combining work with various planes of life of individuals is largely caused by the progressive changes in the functioning of families, their models, changes in lifestyle and changes in the appreciation of various values in the lives of individuals. The Work Life Balance (WLB) concept is constantly evolving, following, on the one hand, changes taking place in organizations, and, on the other hand, changes in the organization's environment, including in the socio-economic, cultural, political and security spheres. The emerging challenges require constant analysis of the approach in the area of human resource management as well as the general activity of the state (public policies).

The aim of the article is to indicate the importance of the idea of Work Life Balance for management and public policy, and to develop recommendations for employers and public authorities.

The work consists of two parts - theoretical and empirical. The study describes the conditions for the development of ideas, attempts to define the concept for management and public policies, indicates the benefits and costs of developing the idea. The research part presents the results of nationwide research indicating the main expectations of employees from the organization and actions of public authorities.

2. Work Life Balance - Theoretical Basis

Balance between private and professional life is a multidimensional phenomenon defined as the idea of Work Life Balance (WLB). The indicated trend emerged at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s in the USA and Great Britain when the provisions regulating weekly working time entered into force. It was then that people began to pay attention to the role of the employee's free time in the development of individuals, enterprises and entire societies.

The reasons for the creation of the WLB concept will be insisted on social and cultural changes related mainly to the entry into the labor market of women and the need to apply a new division of domestic and caring responsibilities. The main assumption of this concept was to support employees in reconciling work and private life in various dimensions. It was pointed out that the harmonious

coexistence of both areas of human life allows achieving better results than limiting one of them or the functioning of one area of human life at the expense of the other.

An employee who skillfully combines professional and non-professional life may be more satisfied and feel a higher level of satisfaction in various spheres of life. A satisfied employee is more effective, enjoys professional and private life, is resistant to stress, gets sick less, but also has favorable conditions for performing family-related duties and improving the quality of his life.

Despite numerous studies in the field of many scientific disciplines, the concept of WLB has not been given a single definition, and the term is understood differently by researchers (McNall *et al.*, 2009). The term Work Life Balance has been analyzed for a long time, but it is often synonymous with terms such as: reflection on one's own experiences in life and at work, the level of involvement in social roles or life satisfaction, the pleasure of combining work and personal life, conscious control of roles played in life, etc., (Ferguson *et al.*, 2012; Kalliath *et al.*, 2013).

Greenhaus and Allen define the balance between work and family as a general approach in which there is compliance between the effectiveness and the sense of job satisfaction in an individual and their compliance with the life values of a human being (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011). The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) draws attention to the fact that work-life balance relates to the level of priority between work and personal life. A good work-life balance is achieved when the right of the individual to a fulfilled life in and out of gainful employment is accepted and respected as the norm - to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society (Eurofound, 2022).

WLB is an important contemporary challenge for human resource management, especially in a situation where more and more people play dual roles (parent and employee). Due to the fact that there is no definitional consistency, the authors of the studies should always define their own understanding of WLB.

The authors of this study believe that WLB is a process that should undergo constant changes toward balancing, harmonizing, integrating, adjusting, or reconciling work and private life. Activities in the field of WLB require involvement in recognizing the changing needs and expectations of citizens and employees, as well as adapting the activities of the state and organizations to these changes.

The development of the WLB idea and its consequences is so important for the development of societies that in 2019 the European Union developed a directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) concerning the work-life balance of parents and carers (Porte *et al.*, 2020). The introduced regulation was aimed at developing solutions useful for working parents and guardians, so that women and men had equal opportunities on the labor market and the possibility of reconciling work and family life.

The legal act regulates the issues of employees' access to flexible forms of work, and introduces legal regulations regarding the use of parental, paternity and care leave as well as leave due to force majeure in urgent family matters caused by illness or accident. The introduced regulations are intended to draw attention to the role of men in participating in some of the caring responsibilities. The actions taken are also aimed at changing the perception of the role of a woman as a caregiver and parent taking over a significant part of parental responsibilities, in favor of shaping a new model of a woman-worker and new rules for the functioning of modern families.

The aim of the work was also to prevent the withdrawal of women from the labor market and to counteract the inactivity of women in response to the demographic changes of aging European societies. EU member states had three years to implement the law. In Poland, this deadline expired in August 2022. It is expected that the regulations will not enter into force until 2023 (Szczudlińska-Kanoś and Marzec, 2022).

In the literature on the subject, one can note a discussion on the scope and forms of implementation of the Work Life Balance idea, the approach to the issue is different in the European Union, and different can be found in the United States. The American model emphasizes voluntary actions by employers, with an emphasis on the motivational approach. There, tools especially prepared for various groups of employees are important, with a focus on acquiring employees who are valuable to the organization and creating favorable conditions for these employees for the best possible work results. The European model consists of two components, ie social and obligatory, and is mainly directed at national activities. In Europe, the basis for the functioning of the WLB idea are legal regulations and social dialogue focused on pro-family policy and employment growth in groups that have problems with finding a job or employment (Muczyński, 2013).

Several barriers can be identified that may limit the introduction of tools facilitating the combination of professional and private life, ie: insufficient knowledge about the solutions that can be applied and about the results that can be achieved; irregularities in information and advisory support for both groups of stakeholders (employees and organizations); the lack of appropriate legal standards regulating the issue of WLB programs development and the introduction of individual tools; lack of centrally financed instruments or to support the implementation of WLB programs (e.g., tax breaks, payable care allowances, etc.); no practice of providing information on experiences in implementing various WLB programs and tools (Głogosz, 2008).

Work-life imbalance can have many negative consequences at the level of the entire country and society, as well as at the level of organizations and individual employees and their families. Table 1 below lists the most important effects of imbalance in human life from the perspective of individuals, organizations and entire societies.

Table 1. Benefits and disadvantages of work-life balance at various levels.

| | Disadvantages of not having WLB | Benefits of a preserved WLB |
|--|---|--|
| Society. Macro scale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A declining number of births • Postponing the birth of your first child • A growing number of divorces / increasing number of single-parent families • A growing social inequalities • Increasing disease incidence • Inadequate childcare and growing pathology among children • Rising unemployment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the birth rate • Reduce the number of separations and divorces • Better childcare, • Increasing the quality of life, • Falling unemployment • Reduction of social inequalities |
| Organization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence from work • Increase in fluctuation in employment • Less work involvement • Increased stress among employees • Less concentration and productivity of employees • Worse relationships at work and with customers • Less creativity and innovation of employees • Loss of investment in human capital | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the productivity and competitiveness of entities • Increase in employee motivation at work • Increase in employee loyalty and employee identification with the workplace • Acquiring and retaining better qualified employees, • Reducing stress among employees • Re-education of costs resulting from employee rotation • Building a positive image of the entity - socially responsible and family-friendly • Increase in the quality of work • Increase in the value of the entity in the long run |
| Employee (his family) Micro scale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress for employees and their families • Deterioration of health, including mental health • Conflicts in the family • Worse childcare • Divorces / One-Parent Families • Alcoholism and the increase in addiction • Increase in civilization diseases • Lack of sense of security in family and work life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-esteem of employees and motivation to work • Reduce stress and disease • Reducing the sense of guilt due to lack of time to be with children (family) and / or to perform professional duties • Greater satisfaction with the ability to reconcile various components of life (work, family, personal life) • Increasing job satisfaction • Identification of employees with the workplace |

Source: Own study based on: Borkowska, 2003; Muczyński, 2013.

For a long time, there have been discussions about the possibilities of taking action in various areas to guarantee a balanced life for professionally active people. Conscious managers of various levels take initiatives to eliminate the external and internal effects of the lack of balance between private and professional life. These issues are taken up both at the level of state policy and local government, but also at the level of various entities. The issue gained a new perspective in the era of a pandemic, when many working parents had to adapt to their professional and family roles in new conditions.

For this article, one of the elements constituting private life was analyzed, namely family life. Family and work are the two most important aspects of human life. In Poland, the family is indicated as the most important value for 80 percent. society (CBOS, 2019). Work is part of life that allows you to realize your personal aspirations and life goals.

The traditional division of roles between women and men has been changing for several decades. Women more and more often take up professional work and combine professional duties with taking care of children. For some time, men have also been increasing their commitment to parental roles and participating in household chores. One can observe the phenomenon of mixing roles due to the time spent on fulfilling them, new behavior patterns and the complexity of changes in various spheres of life.

Public authorities try to respond to changes in social expectations and implement new and modify current regulations supporting the development of WLB. In recent years, in Poland, among other things, maternity leave has been extended, and parental and paternity leave has been introduced. There are tax breaks for employees with children and various programs, including financial ones, to support parents with children. The number of nursery and pre-school children covered by institutional care increased, but the number of care and educational institutions is still insufficient.

Increasingly, employers, seeing the changes taking place in their environment and in the way employees function, take actions, both aimed at professional work and the private life of employees. Many organizations begin to notice the need to support employees in fulfilling various social roles, as this may lead to an improvement in the quality of work and the achievement of better results for the entire organization. By introducing the WLB idea, it is possible to alleviate many conflicts that arise between family and work life (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Therefore, it is important to indicate to both managers and persons responsible for designing public policies the direction of changes expected by society. The authors of the article, observing the changes taking place during the pandemic, conducted a nationwide survey for this purpose, the results of which are presented below.

3. Materials and Methods

The global coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020 has demonstrated, even more than before, the need to develop instruments that would facilitate the reconciliation of work and private life. Working parents, who during the pandemic had to reorganize their professional and family life due to new conditions, became a special group of employees.

The authors of the study planned and conducted a nationwide survey in Poland, the main purpose of which was to comprehensively assess the situation of working parents during a pandemic, and in particular to diagnose how employees combine their professional duties with caring for children during a pandemic and what expectations they have towards employers and public authorities in the context of combining work and family life (Lonska *et al.*, 2021; Bukowska *et al.*, 2021; Vyas, 2022).

The research was preceded by a pilot study. The study used the diagnostic survey method, the technique was CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing). The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions (mostly closed questions and 2 open questions) and was available on the main website of the national school electronic journal Librus and sent via the portal directly to user accounts. The justification of the method used was dictated by the fact that the studied community was dispersed and was characterized by a large variety of socio-demographic characteristics.

The selection of the research group was deliberate. The survey was conducted on March 16 - April 2, 2021. The survey was conducted among 10,331 respondents, including 7,800 professionally active parents with children to raise. Out of the 7,800 people analyzed in detail, as many as 7,063 (91%) are professionally active women with children. In terms of age, people aged 41-50 accounted for 47.9% of the respondents, and at the age of 31-40 - 46.7%. The vast majority of respondents had a university or higher vocational degree - 69 percent. 18.9% of respondents had secondary education.

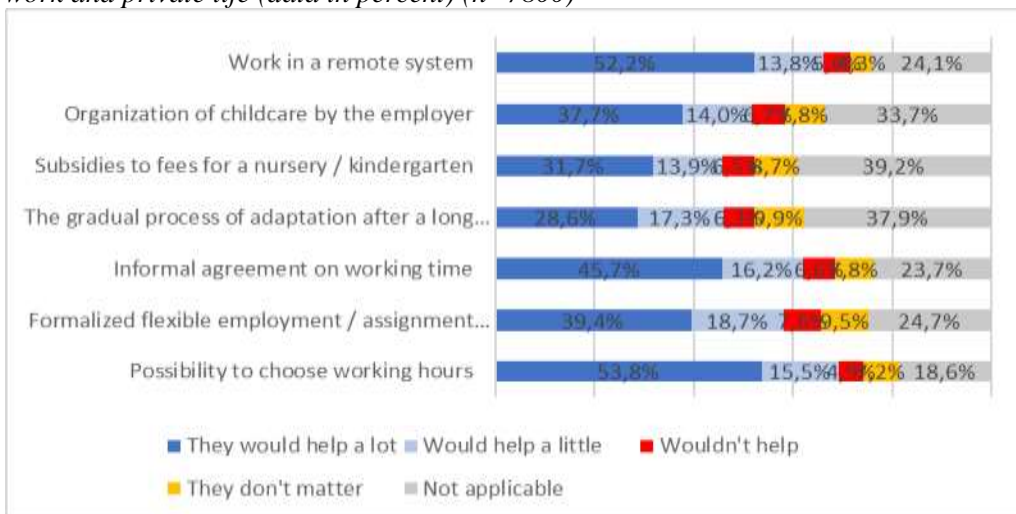
4. Results

The research shows that the possibility of reconciling work and family life is very important today for employees. The majority of working parents (90%) pay attention to the possibility of combining professional and private life when choosing a job. Every third parent (32.9%) indicates that the possibility of combining childcare with work is decisive and dominant. For a similar percentage of employees (32.7%) this is important, but not conclusive. 25.6% of respondents consider this aspect important. Only for 10 percent parents, the possibility of reconciling work and family responsibilities is irrelevant (it is insignificant or irrelevant).

The respondents indicated which tools used by employers would help them harmonize their professional and private life. Figure 1 shows the results of the analysis. In the opinion of the respondents, it was helpful for the employer to use free working hours (53.8% helpful to a large extent, 15.5% helpful to a small extent) or the implementation of a remote work system (52.2% helpful to a large extent, 13.8% helpful to a small extent).

Informal working time agreements are also important for employees - they would significantly help 45.7% of the respondents and, to a small extent, 16.2 percent. Over 37 percent of respondents expect support in the organization of childcare by the employer and subsidies to fees for a nursery or kindergarten - 32 percent.

Figure 1. Assessment of tools introduced by employers that would help in combining work and private life (data in percent) (n=7800)

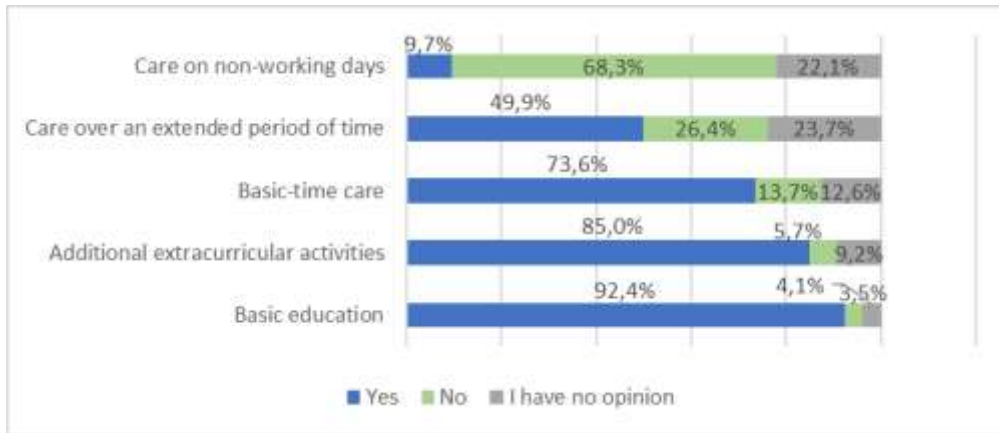


Source: Own study based on research.

Most of the respondents expect from public authorities the introduction of regulations that would enable the use of tools such as remote work or flexible working hours, as well as the development of institutional childcare. Figure 2 shows the expected scope of action in relation to schools and care and educational institutions as assessed by working parents.

Parents believe that schools should mainly provide education for children (92.4%) and basic-time care (73.6%). Moreover, a significant proportion of parents (85%) believe that educational institutions should also organize extracurricular activities for children. Half of the parents (49.9%) believe that institutions should look after their children during extended working hours, and one - fourth (26.4%) are of the opposite opinion. A significant proportion of carers (68.3%) do not see the need for schools to operate on non-working days, e.g., on weekends.

Figure 2. The expected scope of action towards schools and care and educational institutions as assessed by working parents (data in percent) (n=7800)



Source: Own study based on research.

5. Discussion

The nationwide research conducted in Poland on a sample of over 10,300 thousand parents raising children shows that remote work and the possibility of choosing working hours are the factors that, according to the respondents, help achieve harmony between work and family life to the greatest extent. While working hours individually tailored to the needs of specific employees, without being imposed by the employer, may help in obtaining WLB, the possibility of remote work is debatable. It can be a huge threat in combining family and professional duties and, as a result, lead to the loss of separation between professional and private duties.

Therefore, working remotely at home is also associated with the need to acquire skills in the field of time management. The role of employers in this regard is also crucial.

6. Conclusion

The modern labor market should move towards maintaining a balance between work and private life. It seems that implementing the idea of "work life balance" is necessary for women. Professionally active mothers face the challenge of reconciling professional work and running a household. Maintaining the balance between work and family life is influenced not only by the employee (parent), but also, to a greater extent, by the employer, local authorities and government institutions.

On a macroeconomic scale, government institutions can ensure the proper operation of the tax and social security systems, but also the operation of healthcare and social policy regulation. At the regional / local level, it is important to ensure an

appropriate communication system, the operation of educational institutions and the provision of access to medical care. At the lowest level, "work life balance" is shaped by the employers themselves by organizing working conditions and by supporting their employees' professional careers. Employers may, in order to alleviate the conflicts of roles of employees with working parents, introduce programs to reconcile work and private life. Such programs can include a number of innovative ways of organizing work. The salary and non-payroll support of families is also important.

The pandemic has shown that satisfaction with family and professional life is necessary to mitigate conflicts on the line of work at home and to counteract burnout, a sense of security in the position held, as well as necessary for the personal development of employees. For 91 % of respondents when choosing a job, it is extremely important to be able to reconcile it with household chores, and for 33 % this is the determining factor. Working parents use different strategies in carrying out their professional duties and caring for their children. Most of them (70.8%) adapt their work to taking care of children.

Research shows that half of employers create conditions for parents to reconcile work and professional life. Employers offer various tools / instruments to facilitate the WLB - the most common are working in a remote system (26%) and flexible working hours (38%). Employees would expect employers to provide parents with a choice of working hours (54 %) or work in a remote system - 52 %. In obtaining WLB employees would also be helped by informal agreements on working time (46 %) and the organization of childcare by the employer - 38 % and public authorities.

Contemporary organizations should take care of the balance between private and professional life of their employees on many dimensions. In addition, a new challenge for management should be a varied and individual approach to individual employees with appropriate communication to properly assess the needs and expectations of various groups that have undergone further changes after the outbreak of the pandemic. These expectations are not sure. In the following part of the article, an attempt was made to indicate what expectations working parents have towards employers and public authorities.

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