

Chapter 12

Work–Life Balance: The Importance of Human Resource Managers' Role

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of human resource managers in work-life balance, analysing the evolution of women's role in society and in the labour market. The existence of different barriers that keep women far of managerial positions is pointed out, as well as the factors that could explain why this glass ceiling is still present. Human resource managers play an important role as agents responsible for the profitability and growth of the organization, but also as victims of work-family conflict of their own and as important actors in implementation of family-supportive policies designed to alleviate this conflict. Their perceptions about the positive and negative outcomes related to Work-life balance will be analysed in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The labour market has experienced profound changes over the last decades in most developed countries, and in different intensity. Nevertheless, it has only been more recently that we have seen the most significant changes in the structure of the workforce and organization of work, and especially in the roles of women. In global terms, the participation of women in the workforce has increased. Women have been incorporated into occupations that were previously reserved for men and their access to education and training has increasingly been improved. However, despite these important achievements and although many public organisms have implemented a series of legal equality policies in the majority of countries, the fact of being a man or woman continues to determine the opportunities that a person has to hold certain jobs or to access positions of greater responsibility. There remain a number of factors

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(stereotypes, values, cultures, sexual or psychological harassment, etc.) that influence the development of situations of gender discrimination in the workplace. The absence of an employment policy that prioritises employees' work-life (WL) balance is one of these factors. This indicates the long and slow road that lies ahead.

Society equates women with caring responsibilities, more particularly with childcare commitments, making them the primary target of WL balance provisions. However, this is not an issue only for women. Men also want to reach equilibrium. They do not want to be absent parents who just come back home with a salary. It is for this reason that companies need to change and, although some of them are implementing WL balance practices in their business strategies, progress is still very slow (Burke, 2010).

Human Resource (HR) managers play a key role in this respect, not only as agents responsible for the profitability and growth of the organization, but also as victims of work-family conflict of their own and as important actors in implementation of family-supportive policies designed to alleviate this conflict (Poelmans et al., 2003). As part of management they must consider the good of the organization, but they are also employees who can lead by example by using the policies themselves (Kasper et al., 2005). In this sense, the perception that managers have about the benefits and disadvantages of establishing programs and practices of work-family balance can be crucial in the adoption process.

In this line, top managers are entrepreneurial resources for a firm that affect its performance through their mental structures and Upper echelons theory highlights that the demographic characteristics of the top management team are a good representation of the underlying traits and the cognitive processes of the top executives. Therefore, experiences and demographic factors may determine the HR managers' perceptions of the positive and negative effects of WL balance.

In this chapter, the aim is presenting WL balance as challenge for women and men, and specifically for HR departments, analysing the positive and negative consequences of the offer of benefits, and how organisations implement these policies. For this review, this chapter begins with an examination of the relationship between gender and work. Next, we present an overall review of WL balance, followed by a section highlighting the role of Human Resource Managers. This chapter also explores the more usual practices and outcomes of WL balance.

GENDER AND WORK

Traditionally, patriarchal societies assign to men the responsibility for providing income to the household and women all obligations related to the domestic, such as care and child rearing and housework. Traditional gender roles division linked male identity to the concept of "profession" and female role to "mother and/or wife". This explains how still in the current society a behaviour or attitude is associated, appropriate or not, according to the gender of the person.

In recent decades, the labour market has undergone significant changes. There have been economic, political, social, cultural and structural reforms that have meant that many women become part of the workforce, breaking their traditional role and achieving qualification levels and work experience comparable to men. Women's increasing participation in paid work has led to the transformation of family structures, from breadwinner-homemaker model to dual-earner arrangement.

However, the persistence of certain traditional gender norms indicates gender equality has not been achieved, because gender labour segregation is still present in different degrees in most developed countries. Not only there are some professions "reserved" for men or women (horizontal segregation)

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