

Work-Life Balance Programs: An Empirical Discussion of Employers' Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Today, the 'work-life balance' is one of the serious considerations in 'employer selection' by the potential employees. The job seekers desire to work for organisations which are 'family-friendly'. The changing family structure and soaring corporate expectations have made both family and work equally important for working individuals. As a matter of fact, the work-to-family and family-to-work spillover has become more common among the working class. These work and family tensions are exerting formidable impact on employee's professional and domestic life. As a sequel, most organisations have experienced severe jolt on productivity and profitability front. Irked by these ill-effects, many organisations have accentuated on introducing family-friendly programs to tide over the problem of work-life conflict. This empirical study covered 81 employees from three new generation private sector banks in Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka. The organizations under study practices 9 different work-life balance programs to help employees balance their work-life. Most of the respondents agree that organisation recognizes and understands their family responsibilities and the work-life balance program offered by their organization 'somewhat' help them in balancing both work and personal life.

Keywords: Work-life Balance, Work-life Conflict, Work-life Balance Programs.

INTRODUCTION:

The work station of 21st century is significantly influenced by the changes in the nature of work, work culture, work expectations and composition of the workforce. Today, the work culture has undergone a wrenching transformation due to the cut-throat competition prevalent in the market. The advent of new technologies have grossly revolutionised the workplace with such features as speed, convenience and flexibility. These changes have posed mammoth challenges to the employees as the work, today, has become more demanding than ever. The long work hours, unpredictable deadlines, frequent touring etc. have become the inseparable features of most works in the corporate world. Furthermore, the employees, today, are pressurized to achieve the daunting targets given by the corporate. As a matter of fact, employees are forced to spend more time at the workplace. This has made it difficult for them to discharge the different roles they have to play at home. Often, the employees find it difficult to give time for their spouses, children and parents, attend to social functions and pursue their interesting hobbies. Conversely, sometimes, the family demands and commitments also come in the way of professional work. In nutshell, the pressure both at work and family disturbs the balance between the personal and professional life. Beside the employee initiatives, this situation provides a strong case for the organisations to chalk out the strategies to enable their employees to cope with both work and family pressures. This paper discusses the work-life balance programs initiated by the organizations to respond to employee needs. The paper also attempts to examine the triggers of work-life conflict and the most preferred work-life balance programs by the employees.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

According Lepak and Gowan (2009) work-life balance is ‘the balance between the demands of work and the demand of employees’ personal lives’.

Guest (2002) defines work-life balance as the ‘satisfaction and good functioning at work and home with a minimum of role conflict’.

Thus, good work-life balance is understood as a situation in which workers feel that they are capable of balancing their work and non-work commitments (Moore, 2007).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Many previous studies on the effects of workplace policies have focused on formal policies, often classified as “family-friendly policies,” such as maternity leave, paternity leave, work-schedule flexibility, and on-site childcare, rather than informal policies such as a supportive workplace culture and supervisory support (Evans, 2002; Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Marquart, 1991; Salzstein et al., 2001). The positive findings on family-friendly policies from these studies have served as catalysts to initiate visible policies such as workplace childcare centers in individual companies.

Appelbaum et al. (2005) pointed out that “workplace climate and supervisors’ attitudes continue to be a key factor in regulating employee access to formal policies.” A supportive culture means that an organisation’s overall structure is sensitive to employees’ family needs without prioritizing work over family issues. A supportive workplace culture may be related to the existence of formal flexible scheduling policies in a workplace, such as flexible daily start and finish times for shifts.

Warren and Johnson (1995) conducted a study with 116 working mothers in Canada to investigate the effects of family-friendly policies and gender differences. The findings revealed that a supportive organizational culture, which included a supportive work environment and the availability of family-oriented benefits, was associated with lower levels of work-family strain.

Using the 1991 Survey of Federal Employees (SOFE) (Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Salzstein et al., 2001), some studies have identified that the use of resources such as on-site childcare increase perceived work-family balance (Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Salzstein et al., 2001) and job satisfaction (Salzstein et al., 2001). Research shows that flexible work arrangements allow individuals to integrate work and family responsibilities in time and space and are instrumental in achieving a healthy work and family balance (Bond et al 1998)

However, some researchers have expressed concerns about formal policies such as leave provisions, flexible scheduling, and childcare support because they see them as likely to be adopted by employers to maximize productivity while in fact having a negative impact on women’s work-family balance (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Runte & Mills, 2004). Mennino et al. (2005), who examined wage and salaried workers (N = 2,877) found that the availability of company policies such as dependent care benefits and flextime was less effective in reducing negative spillover than improvements in the atmosphere of the workplace. Similarly, Berg et al (2003) found that such formal policies were less effective than employee participation and workplace atmosphere in increasing employees’ perceptions that the company helped them balance their work and family responsibilities. In short, Berg et al. (2003) argued that formal policies offer visible benefits for employees, but involve dilemmas that can maintain gender gaps or reproduce employers’ benefits without changing the fundamental work environment.

Many researchers have pointed out that supervisors’ support in organizations is very important for balancing work-life demands (Behson, 2005; Mennino et al., 2005; Secret & Sprang, 2001). In particular, supportive supervision allows for rules to be flexible in the case of a family crisis or illness (Clark, 2000). Ezra and Deckman (1996) found that organizational and supervisor understanding of family duties are positively related to satisfaction with the balance between work and family life. Behson (2005) examined dual-earner families who had a child under 18 or provided care for someone over 65. The findings revealed that managerial support was more beneficial to work-family balance than the availability of benefits in the workplace. A study by Secret and Sprang (2001) that interviewed 374 employed parents who had children under age 18 found that dynamic components such as supervisory support rather than structural components such as formal policies were more likely to affect work-family stress

NEED FOR THE STUDY:

Today, the subject of ‘work-life balance’ is increasingly becoming a hot topic both in the family and corporate circles. The current context of globalisation and the changing nature of work have provided the impetus for the

topic. The current work scenario is marked by the fast pace of change, intense pressure, constant deadlines, changing demographics, increased use of technology and the co-existing virtual workplace (Shankar and Bhatnagar, 2010). In fact, the problem of 'work-life balance' is more acute in today's fast thriving sectors like IT and ITES, insurance, banking and financial services. The employees working in these sectors are facing competing demands between their work and family, paving the way for work-life interference and conflict. Since the concept and area of 'work life balance' has gained currency in the recent past, there is ample scope for conducting extensive research to unearth the intricacies of work-life interference. The present study is confined only to the banking sector and three new generation private sectors banks operating in the Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka have been selected for the purpose of the study. The study attempts to uncover the organisational approach to employee work-life balance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To study and examine the organisational responsiveness to the employee work-life balance issues
2. To uncover the various work-life balance programs used by the organisation for the benefit of employees
3. To study and examine the causes for employee work-life conflict
4. To identify the employee preferred work-life balance programs

METHODOLOGY:

The sample covered 81 employees from three new generation private sector banks in Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka. Questionnaire method was adopted to collect the data. Keeping in view the objectives of the study, a well structured questionnaire was administered to the respondents. All questions were close-ended. A simple random sampling method was used to collect the responses and the respondents were approached during the working hours at their branches. There were two parts in the questionnaire. Part-I: Demographic Profile; Part-II: Work-life Balance Questionnaire. The respondents were asked a series of questions encompassing both their work and family domain. The results of the study are bound to suffer from the limitations of sampling design and bias in response of the respondents. If there had been more female respondents, it would have produced more effective results. Nevertheless, according to Guest (2002), work-life balance has relevance for all individuals. By relating work-life balance to career stage, Sturges (2008) includes younger professionals without family responsibilities into the domain of work-life conflict. Thus, work-life balance is an all encompassing issue having relevance to a larger audience.

Null Hypotheses for Statistical Testing:

H₀: The marital status and freedom to speak out and take time off from work to attend urgent family needs are not dependent

Profile of Respondents:

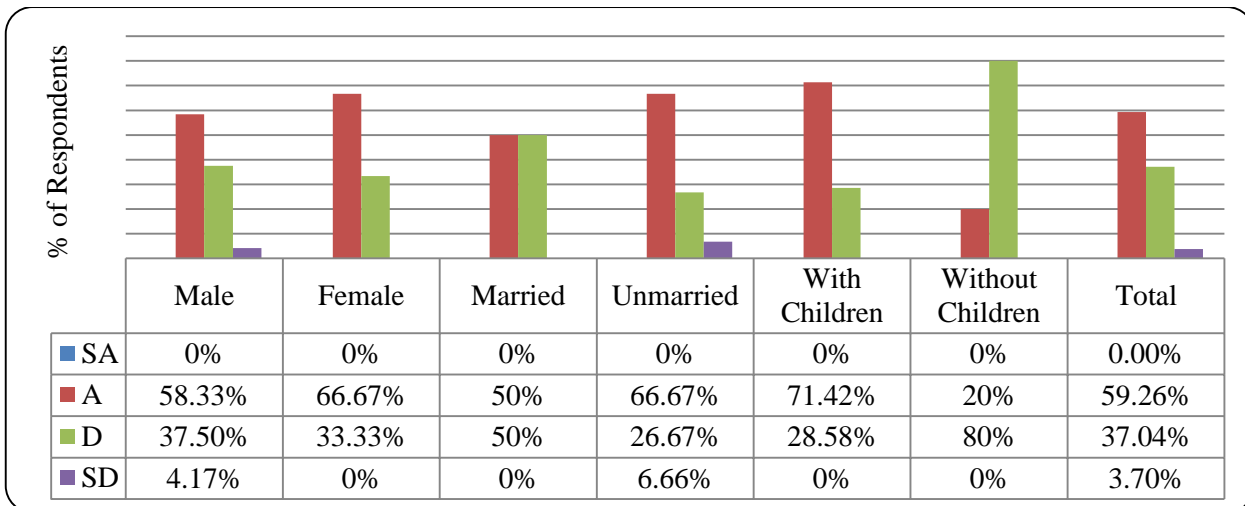
Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Factors

Demographic Factors		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	72	89
	Female	9	11
Age	20-25	27	33
	26-30	36	44
	31-35	12	14
	36-40	3	4
	41 and Above	3	4
Marital Status	Married	36	44
	Unmarried	45	56
Children	With Children	15	41
	Without Children	21	59

Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

STUDY RESULTS:

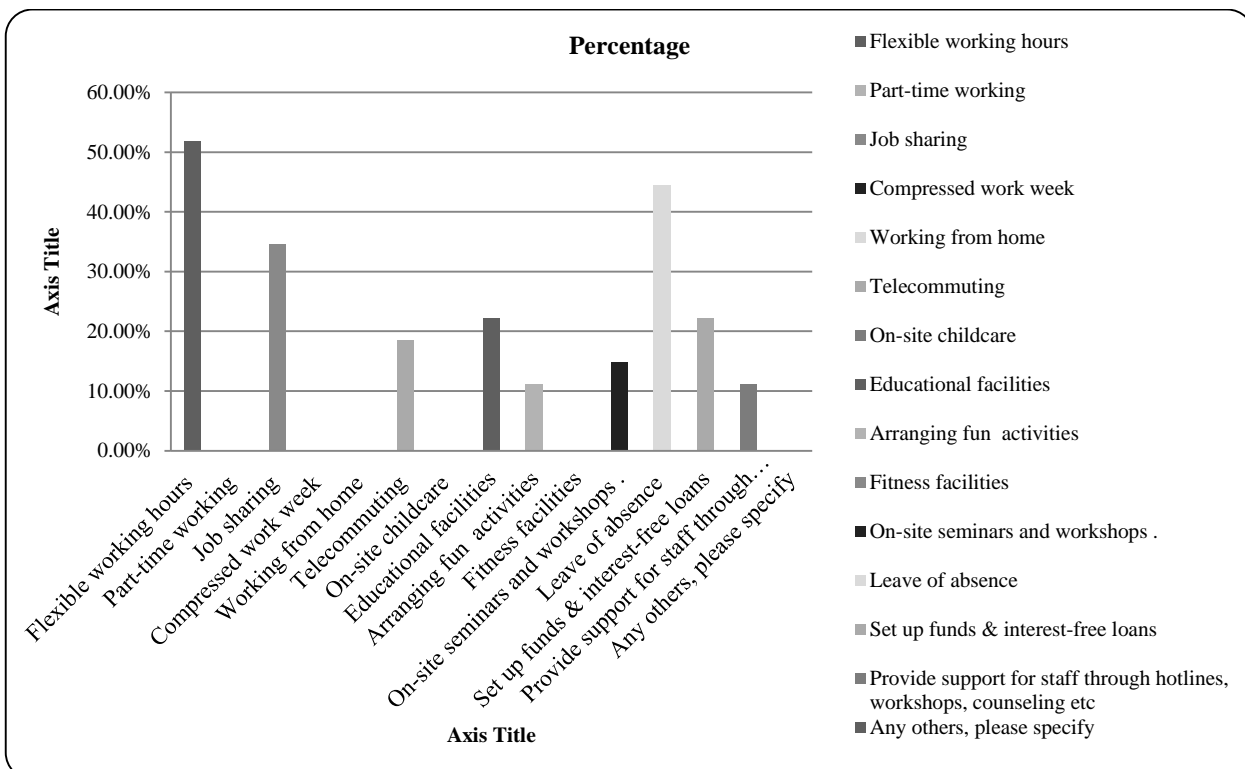
Figure 1: Organisation recognises and understands family responsibilities



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

It is the desire and endeavour of every working individual to maintain proper balance between work and family life. In fact, this desire becomes a reality or close to reality when employees find all possible cooperation from their organisation. A few statements have been presented to the respondents to examine the concern and support of the organisation as well as other staff in maintaining proper balance between work and family life. The above figure depicts that none of the respondents strongly agree (SA) with the statement presented. However, most (59.26%) of the respondents agree (A) that their organisation recognises and understands family responsibilities. It is interesting to note that 71.42% of the respondents with children agree to this. It is also apparent that 37.04% of the respondents disagree (D), most are the respondents without children. The remaining 3.70% of respondents strongly disagree (SD) with the statement.

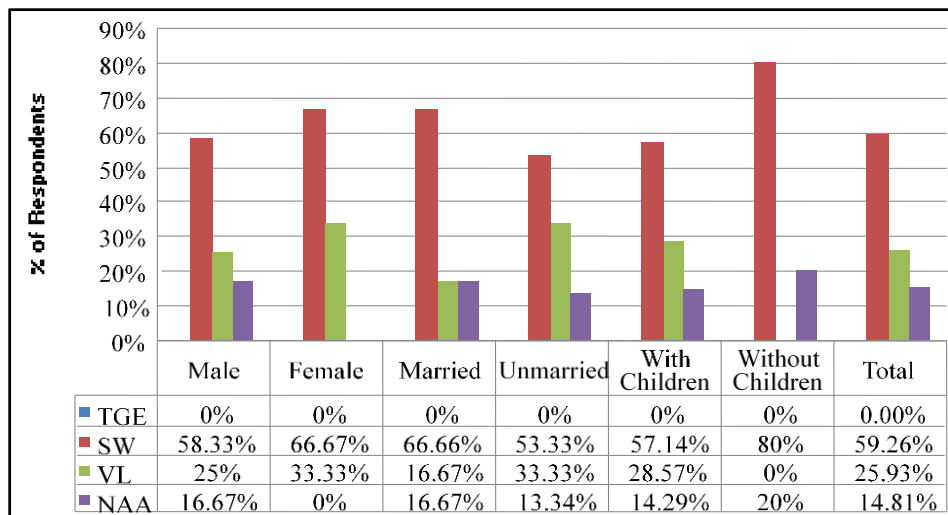
Figure 2: Work-life balance programs offered by the organisation



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

It is true that work-life balance cannot be achieved only by the isolated efforts of employees alone. In fact, work-life balance is need to be a two-pronged initiative. Both employer as well as employees are required to make concious and concerted attempt to strike the balance between personal and professional life. Many companies have realised the significance and merits of providing work-life programs. The above chart provides insight about the work life balance programs practiced by the three organisations in question and the extent to which it has been used by the respondnets. The chart shows that from the list of 14 programs presented to the respondents, 9 programs are practiced by the companies under consideration. It further follows that among the 9 programs practiced, the ‘flexible working hours’ is the most prevalent followed by ‘leave of absence’ and ‘job sharing’ respectively. The organisations under consideration have not yet introduced practices like part-time working, compressed work week, working from home, on-site child care, fitness facilities etc.which are widely practiced in western countries.

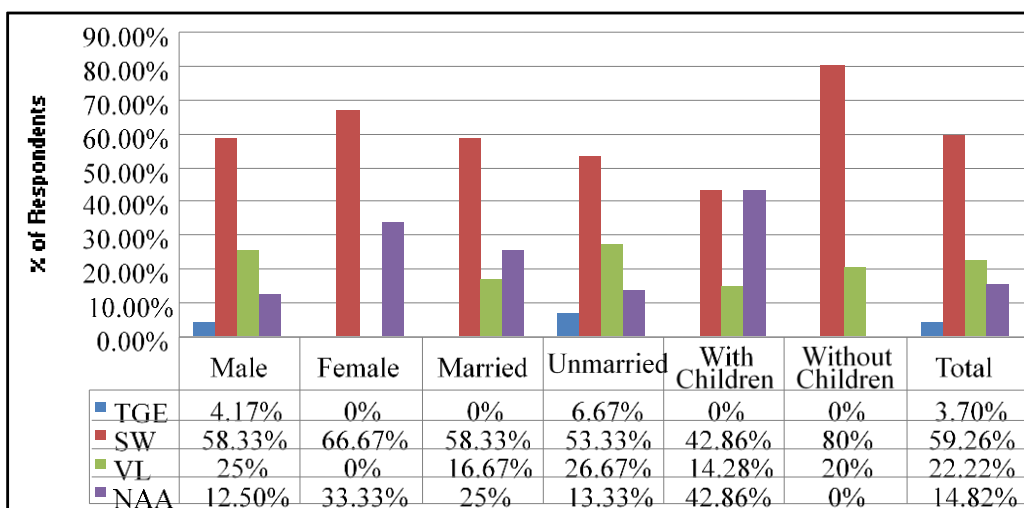
Figure 3: Utility of work-family programs practiced in meeting employee personal needs



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

The above statement is presented with a view to examine the utility or relevance of the programs introduced by the companies to their employees. The programs introduced shall be employee friendly and shall help the employees to maintain the balance between professional and private life. The above figure narrates that none of the respondents state that programs introduced meet their personal needs to a ‘great extent’ (TGE). But, 59.26% of the respondents agree that it ‘somewhat’ (SW) meet their personal needs. The respondents who say, ‘very little’(VL) correspond to 25.93% and 14.81% of the respondents say, the programs are ‘not at all’(NAA) useful for them.

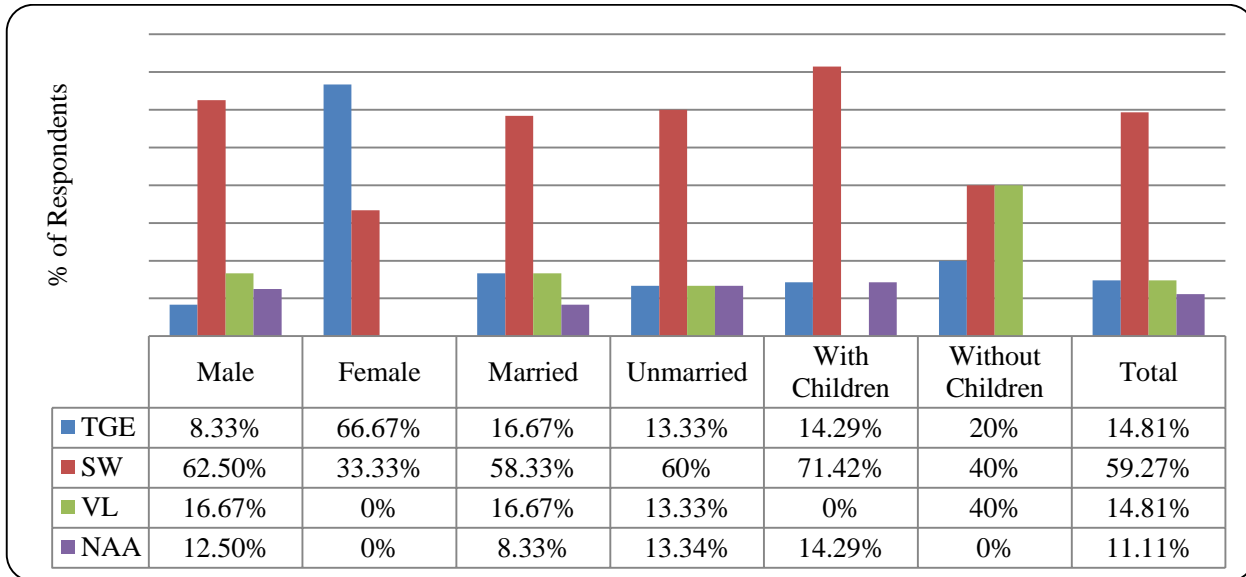
Figure 4: Involvement of organisation in implementing work-family programs



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

The statement examines the attitude of the companies towards the implementation of work life balance programs. The figure demonstrates that 3.70% of the respondents say that the involvement is ‘to a great extent’ (TGE) and 59.26% of the respondents opine that the company sincerity and involvement is ‘somewhat’ (SW) in the implementation of the programs. On the other hand, 22.22% of the respondents voice their concern saying ‘very little’ (VL) involvement and 14.82% of the respondents say ‘not at all’ (NAA) or ‘no involvement’.

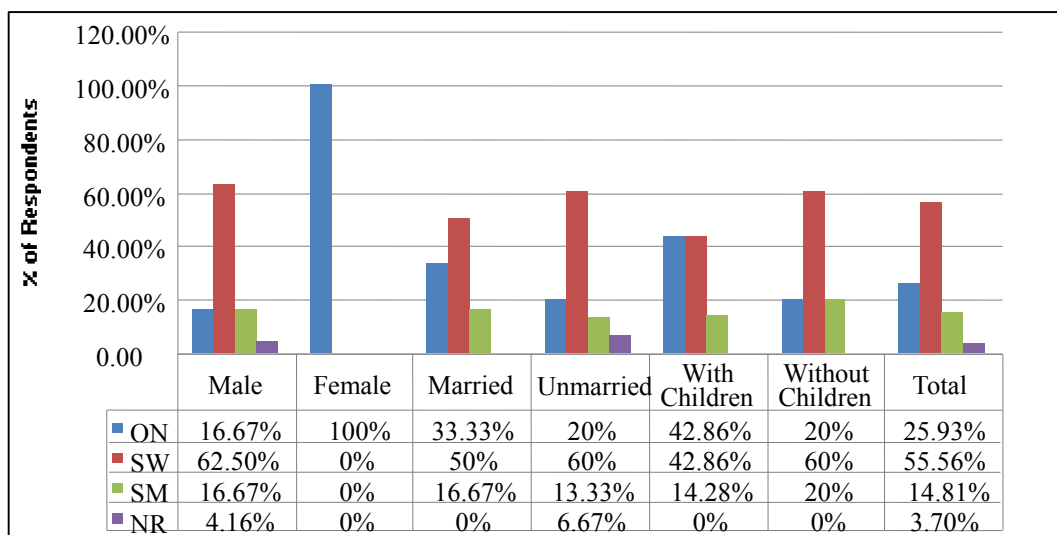
Figure 5: Freedom to speak out and take time off from work to attend urgent family needs



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

This statement attempts to unfold the ‘comfort feel’ of individual employee when it comes to take time off to attend urgent family matters. The chart outlines that 14.81% of respondents agree to a great extent (TGE) that they appreciate the freedom given by the company and they feel free to speak out and take time off from work to attend urgent family matters. A big chunk of respondents corresponding to 59.27% also feel ‘somewhat’ (SW) comfortable in asking for time off. But, 14.81% respondents say that the freedom is ‘very little’ (VL) and 11.11% of respondents say freedom is ‘not at all’ (NAA) given to them.

Figure 6: Supervisor support and flexibility in responding to family needs

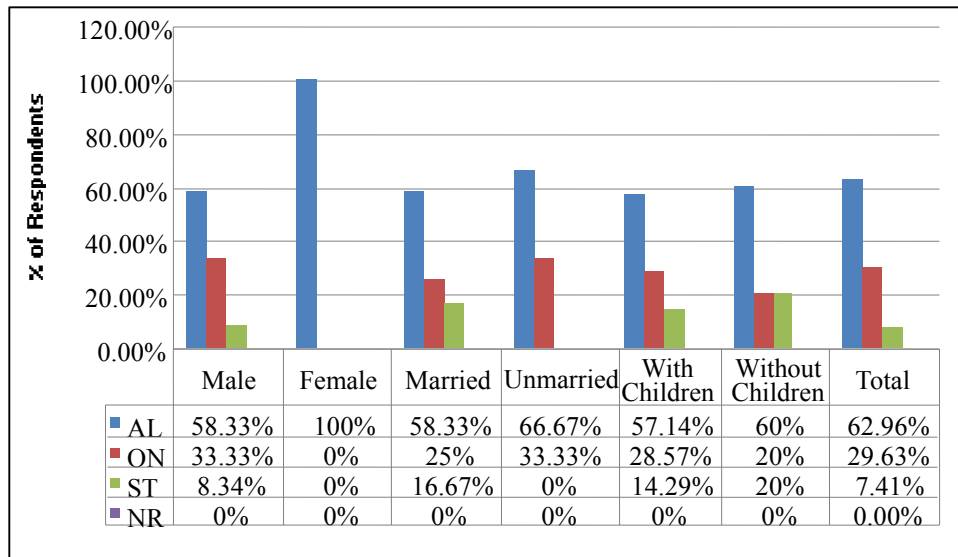


Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

There are instances in some of the companies where supervisors boss over their subordinates. They deny to offer privileges to the employees though they are available in the organisation. The cooperation and support of

supervisor or immediate boss of the employee is very much required for maintaining work-life balance. The statement examines the approach and attitude of supervisor when it comes to responding to family needs. The figure projects that 25.93% of respondents say ‘often’ (ON) their supervisor is very supportive when it comes to responding to family needs. It may be noted that all women respondents have endorsed this view. Another, 55.56% of respondents agree that their supervisor is ‘somewhat’ (SW) receptive and responsive. But 14.81% of respondents say that the boss is ‘seldom’ (SM) flexible and remaining 3.70% of respondents strongly deny saying that their boss is ‘never’ (NR) flexible in responding to their family needs.

Figure 7: Co-workers cooperation and support in responding to urgent family needs



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

This statement probes into the attitude of co-workers when it comes to meeting urgent family needs. When urgent family need arises, the employees may need the cooperation of their colleagues especially in terms of workload adjustment. The figure evinces that 62.96% of the respondents say that their colleagues are very cooperative and ‘always’ (AL) help them when it comes to meet urgent family needs. The respondents accounting for 29.68% also agree that their colleagues ‘often’ (ON) positively respond to their urgent family needs. Only 7.41% of the respondents opine that the frequency is ‘sometimes’ (ST).

Table 2: Factors disturbing work-life balance

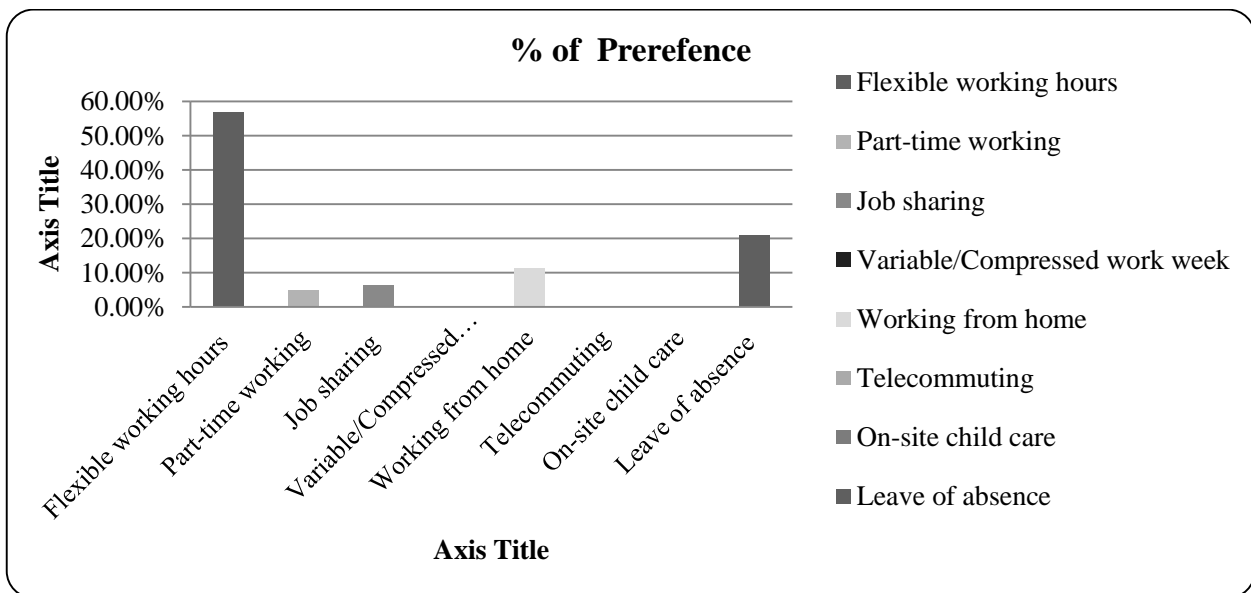
Sl. No	Factors	Not a problem		It is a problem	
		Total	%	Total	%
1	Age and Energy Level	81	100	0	0
2	General Health	78	96.30	3	3.70
3	Knowledge and Skills Obsolescence	78	96.30	3	3.70
4	Workload	38	46.91	43	53.09
5	Outstation Duty	66	81.48	15	18.52
6	Meeting Deadline	44	54.32	37	45.68
7	Inadequate Holidays	54	66.67	27	33.33
8	Child Rearing Responsibility	66	81.48	15	18.52
9	Attention to Sick Parents	57	70.37	24	29.63
10	Higher Educational Plans for Self Development	48	59.26	33	40.74
11	Indifferent Colleagues & Superiors	60	74.07	21	25.93
12	Supervisor’s Expectations & Demands	45	55.56	36	44.44
13	Spouse’s Work Schedule	66	81.48	15	18.52
14	Personal Interest/Hobbies	54	66.67	27	33.33
15	Financial Constraints	66	81.48	15	18.52

Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

The statement presented to the respondents aims to elicit insight about the triggers of work-life imbalance. Based on the review of literature, 15 possible factors which can disturb the balance are listed and presented to the respondents to unearth the triggers of work-life imbalance. It follows from the table that the employees in these organisations are not significantly disturbed by many of the factors listed. However, among the 15 factors, the ‘workload’ of employees is the top reason which is presently disturbing their work-life balance. Precisely 53.09% of the respondents attribute their concern to this particular factor. The other dominant factors which are playing spoilsports in balancing employee work-life are

- Meeting Deadline
- Inadequate Holidays
- Higher Educational Plans for Self Development
- Supervisor’s Expectations and Demands
- Personal Interests/Hobbies

Figure 8: Employee Preferred Work-life Balance Programs



Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

There is plethora of programs which a company can introduce to ensure the availability of quality time for employees to spend with their family. The above statement is presented to find out the perception and preference of respondents in respect of some selected programs that would facilitate availability of quality time for them to spend with their family. The chart shows that, given the choices, 56.79% of respondents opted for ‘flexible working hours’ program as their first and the most preferred work-life balance program. This is followed by ‘leave of absence’ and ‘working from home’ programs in the second and third place respectively. A few of the respondents chose ‘part-time working’ and ‘job sharing’ as their preferred work-life balance programs. However, it may be noted that programs like compressed work week, telecommuting and on-site child care are outside the preference of respondents.

RESULTS OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING:

Chi-square test was applied to test the dependency between the marital status and the freedom to speak out and to take time off from work to attend urgent family needs.

Table 3: The Contingency Table

	Married	Unmarried	Total
Freedom to take Time Off	27	33	60
No Freedom to take Time Off	09	12	21
Total	36	45	Grand Total = 81

Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

Table 4: Calculation of χ^2

Sl. No	Observed frequency (fo)	Expected Frequency (fe)	Fo – fe	(fo-fe) ²	(fo – fe) ² /fe
1	27	26.66	0.34	0.1156	0.0043
2	33	33.33	-0.33	0.1089	0.0033
3	09	9.33	-0.33	0.1089	0.0112
4	12	11.66	0.34	0.1156	0.0099
				Observed Chi-square Value	0.0287

Source: Compiled by the authors based on primary data

The critical value of Chi-square is estimated from the table of Chi-square distribution. For degree of freedom =1[(number of rows-1)(number of columns-1)] and level of significance level $\alpha=0.05$ the critical value is 3.841 which is greater than the observed value of 0.0287. Since the observed value is less than the critical value, the null hypothesis is accepted. In other words there is no dependence between the marital status of the respondent and the freedom to speak out and to take time off from work to attend urgent family needs.

DISCUSSION:

The study was undertaken to examine the employee perceptions on organizational responsiveness to their work-life issues. The study brings out the following salient findings.

- Most of the respondents (60%) agree that organisation recognizes and understands their family responsibilities.
- The organizations under study practices 9 different work-life balance programs to help employees balance their work-life.
- Most (59.26%) of the respondents say that the work-life balance program offered by their organization ‘somewhat’ help them in balancing both work and personal life.
- ‘Workload’ is the most dominant factor disturbing employee work life balance
- Most of the respondents (56.79) consider ‘flexible working hours’ program as the best tool to balance their work and family life.

CONCLUSION:

It is indubitable fact that both work life and personal life are inter-connected and interdependent. Spending more time in office, dealing with clients and the pressures of job can interfere and affect the personal life. While, on the other hand, personal life can also be more demanding when it is beset with such problems like rearing kids or aged parents, financial problems and the like. The skewed work-life balance would affect their health, family life and performance at work. Therefore, it is important and imperative for the employees to maintain proper balance between their work and personal life. The organizations through their innovative ‘family friendly’ initiatives can deal effectively with the issue. On the other hand, employees through proper time management and prioritising skills can cope with the dynamics of ‘work-life conflict’. When employee and the organisation together make conscious and concerted efforts, the ‘work-life balance’ truly becomes an easy affair and would certainly benefit both the factions.

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