Research Paper

Narrations of Work-Life Balance among Academic Staff in an Open Distance Learning Institution

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores Work-Life-Balance among academic staff in an Open Distance Learning institution. A qualitative case study is used. Data for the research was collected from 16 academic staff using purposeful sampling. Academics describe the work-life experiences in the context of five overarching themes: (a) time demands, (b) ideal academic (c) career advancement (d) technology, and (e) work environment. This analysis revealed that academics' work-life experiences are driven by a dearth of time and an excess of roles. Their involvement in multiple, interdependent roles although enriching through career advancement, presents ongoing time-based conflicts due to intense pressures of work. The tension associated with juggling roles significantly impacts their personal well-being and career satisfaction. Recommendations for this study are twofold; those that aid the university management towards more poignant work-life balance policies in the university and the need to conduct more research in Work-Life-Balance in Open Distance Learning institutions.*
Keywords: work-life-balance, open distance learning, academic staff

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) discourse and the exponential growth in WLB research and practice beginning in the 1980s reflects a period of social and economic development in the western countries, in which there was profound changes in the nature of work. In the context of globalisation, organisational re-organisation and efficiency drives became a feature of most organisations. In addition deregulation, increasingly sophisticated technology, and weakened trade unions in many contexts affected work organisation (Marchington, Grimshaw, Rubery & Whilnott, 2005; Sennett, 1998). Business experienced a fast pace of change resulting in more demanding intensified working practices and environments (White, Hill, McGovern, Mills & Smeaton, 2003). This engendered feelings of pressure, lack of time and general 'busyness' (Gambles, Lewis & Rapoport, 2006; Lewis, 2003), sometimes signified by metaphors about time such as 'the time squeeze' or 'time famine' (Hewitt, 1993). These pressures and associated metaphors have been variously attributed to new forms of work and working patterns, or the lure of consumerism and accumulation (Bunting, 2004) that engender a feeling of work and non-work 'imbalance' (Guest, 2002). Work-Life-Balance appears to capture a widely felt need to prevent paid work from invading too much into people's lives.

Increased competition, downsizing and waning relief and donations to universities in a multi-currency economy in Zimbabwe have intensified academic staff's work demands, hence they are urged by senior management to transform their traditional roles of teaching and research by adding an additional pivotal role in strategic marketing for organisational survival. Valcour and Hunter, (2005) report that increasing technological advancement allowing work portability has kept employees connected to their work even after "normal" work hours. With these possibilities offered by Information Communication Technology (ICT), leading to an expansion of flexible and long working hours, non work time for academic employees has been shrinking (Gillespie, 1998). Academic work much as other spheres of employment have over the years also experienced rapid changes in the composition of workforce. Fundamental changes include an increased proportion of women academics (and particularly mothers), and as Greenhaus and Powell (2006) note, greater numbers of dual-earner couples and single parents, demand for workplace flexibility and support for childcare and eldercare. Pressure for institutional transformation has mounted on academic staff and this is explained by the fact that knowledge work depends on human rather than fixed capital and thus this period is characterised by bursts of activity in human resources in universities.

Employee turnover and job dissatisfaction among academic staff has been shown not to be instigated just by poor remuneration but also increasing pressure of work leaving little room for life outside of the work environment and heightened risk of stress related diseases among academic staff (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). New realities have even emerged in ODL institutions and these have not been explained by the existing literature. Existing literature has focused largely on the corporate sector employees. The little work-life balance literature on academic employees has almost exclusively focused on the conventional universities. In view of the above problem this study seeks to:

1. Describe the work-life balance experiences among academic staff in ODL learning institution.

2. Analyse how different personal characteristics of academic staff impact work-life balance experiences.

3. Recommend ways of improving work-life balance at ODL learning institutions.

II.   METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design was selected for this study. Qualitative studies help to understand how people perceive themselves, their surroundings and the environment they act in (Creswell, 2008). A qualitative design was appropriate for this study because little is known about the research problem in the context of academics in an ODL institution. Thus use of a qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration and detailed understanding (Patton, 2002) of the holistic experiences of study participants in the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The research method this study employed is a case study an ODL institution in Zimbabwe. Case studies afford a more in-depth and extensive understanding of phenomena therefore maximising richness and accuracy of data. They allow the researcher to become familiar with the data in its natural setting and fully appreciate the context (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The research recruited participants from a population of 126 academic staff at the institution. It would appear academic staff are at more of a crossroads with respect to work-life challenges. Focus was on a national centre and Harare region which have the largest collection of academics. The population of interest was therefore identified based on their ability to provide insight into the topic and research questions under study (Patton, 2002).

Participants for the present study were chosen using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is characteristic of qualitative inquiry in that small, ―information-rich cases are selected for in-depth study (Patton, 2002:230). Two primary criteria had to be met for selection. Both requirements were necessary for the collection of information-rich cases. First, the research requested participation from male and female academics who are between the ages of 30 and 65 and have worked at the university for at least two years. The research elected to interview academic staff who are within the ages of 30 and 65 because those are the ages at which individuals often experience pressure to balance work with responsibilities outside of work as their families expand and/or aging relatives require additional assistance. Academic staff who have worked at the university for at least two years were chosen for interview because by that time, it is expected that they would be familiar with the work-life situation they encountered. Second, participants had to work in a full-time, academic position. Full-time refers to engagement as an academic employee with the university with a permanent contract. This was an important criterion because it is reported that full-time professionals, in contrast to part-timers, are more likely to report work-life imbalances (Hill, Vjollca, & Ferris, 2004). As such, limiting this study to full-time employees was critical to obtaining rich, thick data.

This study made use of the semi-structured interview which is more commonly used in case study qualitative research. Such an interview is characteristically based on a flexible topic guide that provides a loose structure of open-ended questions to explore experiences and attitudes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview protocol consisted of questions divided into five sections. Interviews were customised for each participant. Participants were asked preliminary questions about their personal characteristics; their age, gender, education level, their marital status and their parental status. The first group of questions was labeled professional life. This section set the tone for the interview and gave participants the opportunity to share their story. Participants were engaged in conversations about their job and the demands it makes on his or her time. In this section I wanted to get a sense of how participants communicate about what it is like to be an academic staff member.

The second section is the work environment section. Participants were asked questions about environmental infrastructure that promote or hinder work-life balance. Participants were encouraged to give examples of people, practices, services, and/or policies that assisted or hindered work-life balance.

The third section is the personal situation section. These questions elicited responses about the different characteristics of academic staff and how these impacted work-life balance. Participants were asked how their personal situations helped or hindered work-life balance. They were asked to share concrete examples of how work and non-work obligations conflicted as a result of their personal situation.

The fourth section is the organisational response section. Participants were asked to identify the work-life balance policies in the university and how these were successful. They were asked whether there were other policy infrastructure within the organisation that limited or advanced work-life balance and the alternatives they took for work-life balance.

Lastly, the work-life balance perceptions section encouraged participants to reflect on their ideal work-life balance situation. Participants were asked how they understood the notion of work-life balance and what sense they made of it. This would delve into the possible recommendations for work-life balance.

Guest (2002) model of work-life balance was utilised as a sensitising concept. According to (Glaser, 1978) sensitising concepts give the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances; whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitising concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. According to (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), "if existing (grounded) theories seem appropriate to the area of investigation, then these may be elaborated and modified as incoming data are meticulously played against them" (p. 273). Guest's model is initially utilised as a lens through which to view and to understand participants' experiences.

The participants were first informed of the purpose of the study and how confidentiality would be preserved (Hughes, 2007). Informed consent was required of all participants. They were informed of the voluntary nature of participation that they are able to stop participating at any time. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants and ensure confidentiality. Participants engaged in 50-60 minute face to face semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place in a private setting that was convenient for the participant, most in the participant's office at work.

III.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics

The study included single (31%) and married (69%) academics. Of the respondents (19%) had no children and (81%) had children. The majority of respondents (63%) were on PhD studies, (12%) had PhDs while (25%) had MSc degrees and not active on PhD studies.

Table 2 Detailed display of Demographic characteristics of participants N=16

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Parental Status	Marital Status
Mateo	35	Male	MSc,DPhil Candidate	3 children	Married
Virimai	54	Male	MSc, D Phil Candidate	4 children	Married
Garikai	56	Male	D Phil	4 children	Married
Bill	33	Male	MSc	1 child	Married
Phil	32	Male	MSc	1 child	Married
Kaitano	65	Male	MSc	6 children	Married
Nhamo	45	Male	MSc, D Phil Candidate	3 children	Single
Kuziva	43	Male	D Phil	2 children	Married
Chido	52	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	4 children	Single
Maneta	34	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	None	Single
Gamuchirai	44	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	3 children	Married
Stacy	30	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	None	Single
Meg	37	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	4 children	Married
Rumbi	52	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	4 children	Married
Chiedza	65	Female	MSc	None	Single
Clarisa	34	Female	MSc, D Phil Candidate	4 children	Married

Work-life Experiences

Academics describe the work-life experiences in the context of five overarching themes: (a) time demands, (b) ideal academic (c) career advancement (d) technology, and (e) work environment. This analysis revealed that academics' work-life experiences are driven by a dearth of time and an excess of roles. Their involvement in multiple, interdependent roles although enriching through career advancement, presents ongoing time-based conflicts due to intense pressures of work. The tension associated with juggling roles significantly impacts their personal well-being and career satisfaction.

Time Demands

The issue of time is primary to this discourse. Time is a finite, nonrenewable resource that academic staff simply do not have enough of. The perceived dearth of time that respondents reported is a consequence of their involvement in a multitude of work-life roles. The number of work-life roles participants occupy is one of the most striking findings of this study. On average, participants are engaged in at least 4 professional roles in teaching, community service , university and research and they further have roles in their personal lives which include parenting, marital roles, house chores and other family and social obligations, each playing a major part in the individual's sense of self.

Academics organise their lives around two primary domains, work and family. It is notable that all participants, whatever their personal responsibility burdens, feel pressured by paid work and constrained in their other life activities by the intensity of the participation required in the paid work domain. These kinds of forces leave the academics bereft of time and energy to participate meaningfully in other life activities, to think, plan, reflect or just to be present in the world, leading to exhaustion and ill-heath. It is important to note that it is not so much the number of roles in which academics are engaged that causes the greatest challenge. It is a scarcity of time that impacts their ability to successfully meet multiple role demands.

(Rifkin, 1987:1) believes that how we structure and spend social time is a measure of how we identify our moral and ethical order:

Time is our window on the world. With time we create, order and shape the kind of world we live in…Every culture has its unique set of temporal fingerprints. To know people is to know the time values they live by.

In this study, information from interviews suggests that academics' use of time is imbalanced, biased toward paid work. (Hochschild, 2008:89) has noted that being busy is the 'opiate of the masses', and decries how time at home has become regimented to accommodate the ultimate priority of paid work, devastating family relationships. The results of this study confirm (Matos & Galinsky, 2011) assertion that the majority of employees in the US industries lacked time for themselves and for their spouses/partners.

Such a discovery is not dissimilar to (Lockwood, 2003) contention that an effective work-life balance makes a person happier and more content. Such contentment is an important ingredient for maintaining the level of hard work they put in their respective careers and remaining satisfied. (Clark, 2000) further explained that it is this desire for stability and "contentment" that gave rise to the discourse of work-life balance departing from the more archaic and contentious role conflict theories that suggested that employees switched from this role to the other between family and work . The results of this study brings out an important dimension that it is not so much about the role conflicts in the academic's schedule but rather the limitations of time given the pressure of their work that posits a challenge for academics at the institution.

Ideal academic

Closely related to the time constraints reported by academics in the interviews is the pressure to conform to the expectations of the profession. This closely relates to the ideal worker model which according to (Thompson, 2008) describes the ideal worker as someone who can devote unlimited time to work and has no distractions outside of the workplace. In this study academics have their conception of what the ideal academic should be. The image of the ideal worker is framed around typical male life patterns of decades past in which men worked outside of the home and were supported by a flow of family work from women (Williams, 2000). While such arrangements were more common in previous decades, they are untenable and unrealistic in today's dual-career environment. Consequently, the ideal worker model no longer fits the reality of employees' lives.

There is agreement from the information gleaned in the interviews that an ideal academic must be an achiever, an accomplished scholar with several research publications, one who is visible in the university community through participation in committees and community work, in short they must perform in all their responsibilities. The greatest challenge though as shared by Phil in the interviews is to "strike a balance between too much committee involvement and not enough".   The academics that were interviewed have a wide range of responsibility level. (Innstrand, Langballe & Falkum, 2010) explain that when an individual feels they have too many responsibilities, they report higher levels of stress, which is consistent with what was found in this study. Phil explains: "So yeah, being a top academic is hard job, I don't have the energy to do the things I love and like." This can be interpreted that if Phil were to have too high of a responsibility level he would be unable to engage in leisure, which would significantly impact her life because she would be unable to experience the rejuvenating aspects of leisure. Academics seem to want to go on and on driven by that desire to want to fit in the perfect model of an academic and this again puts a lot of pressure on their time and eventually affects their contentment and well-being thus a work-life imbalance.

It appears that from this study, as well as in other prior studies like (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000) on 860 corporate employees in the US paid work is the ideal activity and that any compromises to achieve a life balance that reduces the time and energy given to paid work is difficult to accomplish. Paid work wants it all, and has the power, social and symbolic capital to command it. Those who cannot give everything to paid work will always be second best to those that can. Consequently academics at the institution strive for recognition and take on huge work responsibilities and become unwittingly complicit to achieve socially constructed ideals.

Career progression

Also related to the ideal academic is the pressure for career advancement in the academic field. Participants agree that academics thrive on the intellectual and collegial stimulation from their peers when they attend professional activities and national research meetings. Thus, development activities for academics

continue to be an important aspect associated with their professional work-lives. (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004) note that the academic profession is very mobile, one cannot afford to be static they must constantly improve and this evident in the dynamism of knowledge itself. This need for mobility comes out in participants accounts that there is a clock for promotion in the academic career which starts from the time one is appointed and seeks tenureship. Participants recount that if you are appointed and you do not show progress in your teaching, research, community service and university service then you do not get tenured and the period before you are tenured is like a probation period so you practically lose your employment. After tenureship the bid for promotion is more related with attaining reputation and high regard as a scholar. As a result the need for career advancement puts significant pressure on academics and they apply more effort in their areas of assessment to the detriment of work-life balance. It is a pressure for survival.

Undoubtedly, the people in this study felt vulnerable and experienced pressure to conform to what they perceived to be the work ethic of an ideal academic. There was a hidden message that those who were not prepared to give their all to their profession, who were considered to be time pressed and energy poor in terms of their unilateral devotion to academy, were not good enough and consequently not worthy of value in the workplace. This creates a deeper sense of instability and fear about the loss of work or reputation and facilitates further work-life imbalance rather than addressing it.

Technology

Technology is a huge factor in the work-life balance experiences of academics. Technology has created new pressure for academics to be connected and driven them to devise new ways to manage their work, like checking email on days off and on weekends. In this study, technology imposed pressure upon academics. For some, this pressure is self imposed as academics strive to respond to students, supervisors, and colleagues. Academics in this regard welcome technology as allowing them to expand their work hours as they can carry the office to the home However, as will be discussed later this does not connote to positive flexibility for work-life balance as it does not substitute the requirement of their physical presence at work and thus the dearth of time to rest for academics. Others feel that their supervisors expect them to respond because they can always be connected to the work. Additional work hours subtract from home time, while high work intensity or work pressure may result in fatigue, anxiety or other adverse psycho-physiological consequences that can influence the quality of home and family life (White et al, 2003).

The expectations surrounding technology and response time have been presented as murky in this study. Thus, in the absence of clear guidelines, academics may self-impose expectations upon themselves to respond to technology around the clock to ease their own workload. They also may believe that their supervisors have an expectation that they will answer their phone calls, text and email messages; in other words, they have been led to believe that the ideal worker is always connected and responsive. Technology has caused work to spill over into academics' lives outside of the workplace and blurred the lines that separate when work ends and life outside of the workplace begins.

However, the limitation of (Guest, 2002) model is its failure to conceptualise the impact of technologyin both the home and the work contexts. This study indicates that technology is a key issue in work-life balance particularly how the home and work contexts merge as it bridges the gap between the two and often putting pressure on them.

Work environment

Specific aspects of the ODL work environment proved to have an impact on work-life balance experiences of academic staff. Participants cite the many administrative roles that academic staff engage in as inhibitive of the flexibility that should normally afforded of lecturers in conventional universities. It was reported that due to the nature of ODL and the flexibility that it seeks to give students it means that academics have an important administrative role to coordinate learning and they also need to be physically present in their offices to provide service to students.

An important discovery from the work environment is how academics have to negotiate their other professional roles like research and community work. From the interviews it appears academics have to create time for those aspects after their office hours and thus putting a strain on other activities in the home environment that enable them to have a work-life balance. This is worsened by the lack of an integrative work-life balance policy in the organisation that seeks to look holistically at work-life balance issues in order to be effective.

In short the academic staff reported work-life imbalances which were characterised by lack of time due to multiple role demands. These multiple role demands are influenced by the desire by academics to meet the ideal expectations of an ideal academic and the need to advance their career. Technology actually facilitates the spill-over of work into the home environment, while the administrative demands in an ODL setup exacerbates

the pressure that academics face to successfully negotiate their roles in both the work environment and the home environment. The outcomes of work-life balance are in this study were numerous. These related to personal satisfaction and well-being at work, at home and in life as a whole. Participants reported dissatisfaction with the high demands at work that limited their lives outside of work. Lack of control in activities both at work and at home affected the well-being of academics as they highlighted a need to be in control of their schedules such that they can operate more meaningful lifestyles.

Utilising (Guest, 2002) model of work-life balance, the work and home contexts have been shown to have an impact on work-life balance. The demands of work for academic staff have been indicated to be too high; and this has been exacerbated by the culture of work as reflected by the organisational and professional culture that seems to limit balance through policies and practices. The culture of work has been shown through the perceptions of the ideal academic, pressure for career advancement, pressure for quality in the university and the inhibitive office hours which drive academics towards being work centred.

IV.   CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the work-life balance experiences of academics at an ODL institution. All of the research participants suffered time constraints in balancing their work and their personal lives. They had multiple roles in which to function in their profession which included teaching, researching, community work and university service yet also they had various roles in the home environment that included parenting, and other personal errands. It appeared the high professional demands of the academics ate into their personal time and they ended up sacrificing their time for leisure and rest to the point of dissatisfaction and lack of contentment. The academics sustained this pressure of work because of the constraint to want to conform to the ideals of their profession. The ideal academic is believed to be an accomplished scholar with so many research publications and thus the pressure to want to keep up with that tag and the pressure for career progression. The career progression of academics depends on how well they perform in the above cited four key areas and in the end academics sacrifice their personal time for career progression and thus the lack of contentment and dissatisfaction.

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