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Work-Life Balance Practice: A proposed study for a Japanese higher education institution

Azzarina Zakaria^{1*}, Stephen A. Zurcher²

* Corresponding Author

¹ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

² Asian Studies Program, Kansai Gaidai University, Osaka, Japan

azzarina@uitm.edu.my, szurcher@kansai-gaidai.ac.jp
Tel: +6013-2041977

Abstract

Japan, a country suffering from a significant decline in their working population, has been criticised for the long working hours for many years, which is attributed to the traditional work culture that emphasises work as a way of life rather than working just for work sake, hence impeding the individual ability to balance work and life. This conceptual paper aims to cast a light on new empirical evidence concerning the work-life balance practice in Japan from a private higher education institution perspective. It will be framed upon a quantitative design via a self-administered questionnaire.

Keywords: work-life balance; working hours; Japan

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1.0 Introduction

Edlin and Gallantry (2012) highlight that the work culture in Japan is quite different than in most Western countries in several measurable areas, most notably, the number of hours that most Japanese work. The Japanese are known to be very hardworking, and their cultural work ethic emphasises work as a way of life rather than working just for work's sake (Ballon, 2018). It is not surprising that a seven-day workweek has become standard practice for an increasing number of Japanese employees (Edlin & Golanty, 2012). Though regular workers in Japan enjoy stable employment, they are often required to work overtime (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019). Long working hours signal commitment in the Japanese workplace (Osawa, 2016). Overwork is culturally accepted as a rule rather than an exception (Gatlin-Keener & Lunsford, 2020).

The amount of time spent at work in Japan is one of the highest among developed countries. According to the Population Census of the Japanese Statistics Bureau, in 2005, on average, a Japanese male regular employee was working 46.6 hours, and a Japanese female regular employee was working 40.4 hours per week (Bienek, 2014). Baudrand et al. (2018) highlight that despite being on a decreasing trend, the percentage of Japanese workers working long hours (60 hours or more per week) remains at a high level compared to other countries (21.9 per cent in Japan, 11.7 per cent in the USA, 7.8 per cent in France, 5 per cent in Germany).

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The Japanese term *karoshi*, which means death from overwork, symbolised the practice of long working hours and problems associated with overwork (Takami, 2019). Ke (2012) defines *karoshi* (was coined to refer to overwork death) as the "extreme acute result of acute cardiovascular events including stroke". Tsutsumi (2019) describes *karoshi* as a suicide associated with overwork. Practically, all Japanese companies have similar situations battling *karoshi* attributed to long working hours and excessive overwork. (Gatlin-Keener & Lunsford, 2020). Deterioration of other work detrimental effects, from diminishing productivity and employee satisfaction to absenteeism and work-induced depression, are also reported with long working hours (Baudrand et al., 2018; North, 2010).

The number of claims related to death from overwork in 2018 has increased by 299 compared to the previous year (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2020) also report that the number of claims related to mental stress has increased due to the number of workers who are "harassed, bullied, or assaulted" in their workplace. The highest claims are found for the motor truck transportation business and medical and nursing industries because of the severe labour shortage (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019). Baudrand et al. (2018) highlight that the cost of depression in the Japanese workplace is evaluated at 14 billion dollars in lost productivity, twice the Japanese energy budget. Whilst depression costs evaluation based on absence from work and attending work while unwell is estimated to be 14 billion dollars on lost productivity. (Baudrand et al., 2018).

The above concerns have threatened Japanese affluence and forced discussions of how to transform social norms, the gender division of labour, and government policies that currently limit the individual ability to balance work and life (North, 2010). The policymakers have concluded that Japanese labour market practices must be reformed in order to meet the growing workers' demand for flexible work arrangements (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019). The Charter for Work-Life Balance was introduced, highlighting working hours as a primary focus for concrete measures where it sets out to reduce long working hours, encourage workers to take their annual paid leave and promote the use of flexible working hour systems (Ikezoe, 2014). The Work-Life Balance Charter is the cornerstone of Japan's efforts to support the efforts of men and women to harmonise work with their family and community life and help Japan erect a family-friendly future (North, 2010).

The Japan survey of the OECD (2019) revealed that although working hours have been 16 per cent lower since almost four decades ago, working hours are still below the OECD figures (Gatlin-Keener & Lunsford, 2020). The statistics suggest the persistent presence of excessive working hours in Japan despite the implementation of the charter. Hence, it denotes the need to further examine the WLB practice in Japan. The motivation of this conceptual paper is framed upon these concerns of WLB, which have become particularly acute in Japan. It aims to cast a light on new empirical evidence concerning the WLB practice from a perspective of a Japanese private higher education institution, as many studies on WLB in Japan have been found within hospital settings (e.g., Fukuzaki et al., 2021; Okoshi et al., 2013; Matsuo et al., 2021). Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to estimate the prevalence of the level of WLB, (2) to discover the relationship between working hours and WLB, and (3) to ascertain whether there are significant differences in WLB concerning gender.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Work-life balance

Work-life balance (WLB) has become a topic of attention in today's business world. Increasing women in the labour market, population ageing, birth rate decline, and the rising of dual income earners in the family have pressed WLB to be the concerns of many countries, including business organisations and researchers. Technology advancement has made work more available at all times, blurring the boundary and interactions between work and other life interests (Omar, 2014), thus may deteriorate the quality of WLB practices.

WLB, generally, refers to harmony between work and non-work aspects of life (Fukuzaki et al., 2021). Benito-Osorio et al. (2014) view WLB as a way to minimise the conflict between work and personal roles. Bienek (2014) frames WLB as an appropriate prioritisation of work and life in a person's lifestyle. Similarly, Omar (2014) describes WLB as a state of equilibrium in which the demands of a person's job and personal life are equal. WLB, therefore, is not limited to family members' assistance; it also extends to other fields in individuals' life, including personal development, community, leisure, religion and health (Benito-Osorio et al., 2014; Bienek, 2014). WLB, hence, can be achieved when employees have the comparable ability to fulfil the commitment to work and non-work domains.

Previously in the 80s, WLB was considered an issue that was a mainly feminine concern (Benito-Osorio et al., 2014) due to the women's traditional responsibilities as caretakers or homemakers for the families. Felstead et al. (2002) remark that WLB is independent of an individual's age or gender. Similarly, Dash et al. (2012) confirmed that WLB is a neutral construct - although many perceive women, adults, and those having more family and job responsibilities as persons who require more WLB (Omar, 2014).

WLB is an essential concept that improves human resource management and employee relationships (Fukuzaki et al., 2021). WLB is seen as an approach for human resources to develop their career while satisfying personal and family needs. (Benito-Osorio, et al., 2014). Introducing WLB practices impact the company in different ways. Literature has shown the positive aspects of executing WLB practices from an individual and organisational perspective. (Benito-Osorio, et al., 2014). Several researchers reported that WLB practices have a positive impact on firm productivity (e.g., Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Gray, 2001), revenue (e.g., Meyer et al., 2001) and performance (e.g., Yamamoto & Matura, 2012). The WLB also decreases absenteeism and lowers the turnover rate (e.g., Gray, 2001). Introducing WLB practices in the company brings about benefits of talent retention and increased employee engagement. (Benito-Osorio, et al., 2014). Benito-Osorio et al. (2014) highlight that the positive effects of WLB are not accomplished in a short period but in the medium and long term. Bloom et al. (2011) argued that the primary goal of implementing WLB policies should not be financial performance but improving employee satisfaction.

2.2 The importance of work-life balance in Japan

Because working hours are high in Japan, the personal time of Japanese workers can be seen as limited, which may lead to a feeling of imbalance and unhappiness (Bienek, 2014). According to a survey realised by Prime Minister Cabinet in 2014, difficulties in managing the two aspects of life increase beyond ten working hours a day and consequently generate stress for some workers (Baudrand et al., 2018). A nationally representative Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare survey (2009) of working households found 40 per cent of respondents hoping for shorter work hours and 60 per cent hoping for more personal free time (North, 2010). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index, Japan ranks 35th out of 40 in the international comparison of WLB indicators (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019). As for the Global Workforce Happiness Index, Japan is reported to score below many other industrialised advanced countries (Baudrand et al., 2018). The awareness of WLB is also reported to be limited in Japan. In smaller firms (less than 100 employees), only about 10 per cent of workers knew of the term "work-life balance", whilst in larger firms, those with some knowledge of the concept or its implications reached 30 per cent (North, 2010).

The traditional Japanese work style affects workers' well-being negatively and exacerbates persistent gender inequality in the workplace and at home. Regular workers in Japan are often expected to follow the ideal worker image, which often requires them to put work before personal life (Aoyagi, 2018). As a result, men are more likely to struggle to meet the ideal worker image, and women are more likely to be in non-regular employment to cut back on work and take care of homes and families (Aoyagi, 2018). Japanese husbands and wives are thus generally expected to have separate, non-overlapping roles, limiting men's involvement in children's care or housework (North, 2010). Since WLB is commonly conceived as a women's issue, making it is difficult for Japanese men to consider asking for their legal right to take leave or even return home from work before their children are asleep. (North, 2010). Similarly, Park (2007) points out that Japanese men cannot assume family responsibilities because of their work commitments, forcing women to take on heavy housekeeping and childcare burdens, making it difficult for women to continue working after childbirth. According to Tanaka and Nakazawa (2005), fathers hardly see their children due to overwork or job transfers and may have difficulties building a relationship with them (Bienek, 2014), leaving the caring responsibilities to the mothers.

Several premises warrant WLB practice as vital to Japan. First, Japan is highly associated as a country with a super-aged society. In 2018, the ageing rate was reported as 28.1 per cent, where one in every four people is 65 years old or older (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2019 in Tomida et al., 2022). The trend proportion of older people in Japan's labour force has continued to increase, i.e., from 4.9 per cent in 1980 to 12.8 per cent in 2018, with older people being highly motivated to work, as the Japanese Cabinet Office reported in 2019 (Tomida et al., 2022). Secondly, there has been much of an increase in women's labour participation in recent years (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019), a trend corroborated by the significant increase in the proportion of female university graduates in Japan (Kato & Kodama, 2015). Since 1997, the number of dual-earner households has exceeded that of single-earner households in Japan (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019), another indicator that reflects the essentiality of the need for WLB presence in Japan.

Japan is also known as a country with a decreasing labour force due to a declining birthrate resulting from workers' inability to combine work and non-work activities (Matsuo et al., 2021). Women have to choose between either continuing to work or quitting working and having children attributed to the concerns of not being able to choose various working styles and long working hours (Cabinet Office Japan, 2008). According to the Japan Institute for Labour (2003) survey, 24.2 per cent of women reported quitting jobs due to difficulties in balancing work and childcare, and 30 per cent left their jobs, saying that the environment enabling a balance between working and child-caring did not exist (Cabinet Office Japan, 2008). Deloitte Women @ Work Report (2022) indicates that 94 per cent of Japanese women believe that requesting flexible working will affect their likelihood of promotion, and 90 per cent of women believe their workloads will not be adjusted if they request flexible-working options. Kato et al. (2013) indicate that the probability of women getting promoted increases if they work longer than 2200 hours a year (Osawa, 2016). Similarly, Yamaguchi (2013) points out that working longer than 49 hours a week will increase the chances of women workers being promoted to manager (Osawa, 2016). These expectations have positioned women in difficulties. One of the distinctive features of countries with high birth rates is that full-time work is highly flexible (Park, 2007). Western countries with high birthrates have introduced various flexible working systems such as work-sharing among full-time employees, flextime and stay-home work (Park, 2007). Based on prevalent trends and statistics in high-birthrate countries (statistics show that countries where couples cooperate in childcare, have high birthrates and high labour productivity), Park (2007) argues that Japanese men can achieve job/homemaking compatibility – performing well in the workplace while sharing family responsibilities – if they change their working style. Park (2007) further enlightens that the key to Japanese women balancing their work with household duties lies in their husbands' willingness to act for compatibility. These arguments suggest two enticing points: (1) WLB is independent of gender and (2) WLB can be an avenue to stimulate family growth.

3.0 Methodology

This conceptual paper proposes a sample of employees of a private higher education institution in Japan. Participants will be required to indicate their work hours during the week, their employment status and work schedules. Approval and ethical consideration will be sought from the Japanese private higher institution before the commencement of the study. An informed consent form will be designed where specific details and the significance of the study will be made available to participants.

Following the objectives highlighted at the beginning of this conceptual paper, the data gathering will be planned through the self-administered questionnaire, which will be made available in bilingual Japanese and English. Most private higher education employees are Japanese, whilst some are foreigners; having a bilingual language would be an excellent strategy to attract responses from the potential

participants. A Japanese language expert will be referred to in preparing the questionnaire translation (including the informed consent form). Back-translation procedures will be applied to ensure the translated version's accuracy.

WLB will be assessed using the Valcour (2007) scale of WLB. Valcour's scale is most holistic as it applies both cognitive and affective components of one's overall assessment in the degree of success at meeting work and non-work demands without implying directionality or transfer processes between work and non-work domains (Omar, 2014). Moreover, Valcour's (2007) scale has demonstrated high internal consistency in some WLB studies (e.g., Omar, 2014). Participants will be asked to respond to the scale using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Data collected will be subjected to several data analysis techniques: internal consistency, descriptive analysis (accommodating research objective 1), correlation analysis (accommodating research objective 2) and independent sample t-test (accommodating research objective 3).

4.0 Conclusion

Japanese firms have been criticised for their long working hours for many years. Excessive working time leading to overwork has impacted workers' well-being at the workplace and in their personal lives. Japanese employees are reported to be chronically overworked and sleep-deprived (McShane & Von Glinow, 2021). According to a study, Japan had the highest aggregate costs associated with employees taking time off for depression, and employees reported more prolonged periods of absenteeism (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2016). The number of claims related to mental stress and death cases related to overwork in Japan has steadily increased (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020) despite the initiatives effort of the government to combat the issues of long working hours. With the prevalence of demographic and social transformations of a significant decline in the birth rate, a declining working population and the increasing ageing population (Kazuo, 2007; Matsuo et al., 2021; Okugawa, 2021), the progression of women's labour participation (Bienek, 2014; Ikezoe, 2014) and the increase of the number of dual-earner households (Aoyagi & Munro, 2019), have positioned WLB practice as even more critical in Japan. The fact that the average working hour of full-time workers has not changed, as reported in the OECD (2020) statistics (Okugawa, 2021), denotes the importance of further studies on WLB in Japan. This conceptual paper intends to clarify the Japanese practices of WLB. Through its empirical study, the findings will offer new insights into the progress of WLB, a pathway that may facilitate an improved design and implementation of WLB practices in Japan in the future. Additionally, this study has the potential to add to the body of knowledge of WLB by extending the organisational context to a higher education institution since previous researchers focused primarily on hospital organisations. The study will also help further position the rigorosity of the Valcour (2007) measurement of WLB through application within different cultures and organisational settings.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This proposed study can be viewed as part of the larger efforts by researchers to understand the WLB in the context of Japan, a country that is particularly acute with significant concerns about WLB. It will offer a new insight into empirical evidence that examine WLB in Japan from an organisational setting of a higher education institution that is seldomly attempted. This study is also expected to enhance the verification of the Valcour (2007) scale on WLB. The proposed study will examine the significant difference between gender and WLB. The results are expected to further attest to the relationship between the two.

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