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Evolving with the times: The changing landscape of work life integration in Singapore

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Evolving with the times – The changing landscape of Work-Life Integration in Singapore

This year, we celebrate 10 years of our journey and look toward a new chapter in our history as we communicate the relevance and increasing importance of Work-Life strategies for developing human capital today.

We consolidated research studies on Work-Life Integration to date so as to understand what has been accomplished in this field and set directions and trends for future research. We commissioned A/P Paulin Tay Straughan, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences and Deputy Head of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, to conduct this research.

The study unearthed several interesting facts about the importance of an effective performance management system, the critical role middle management plays in work-life implementation, and the need to professionalise flexible and part-time work as work choices that come with meaningful benefit schemes that are win-win decisions for both businesses and individuals.

Professor Straughan highlighted the existence of a gap in the translation of flexiwork options down to the individual employee, and identified four key factors influencing this process.

The Implementation Gap

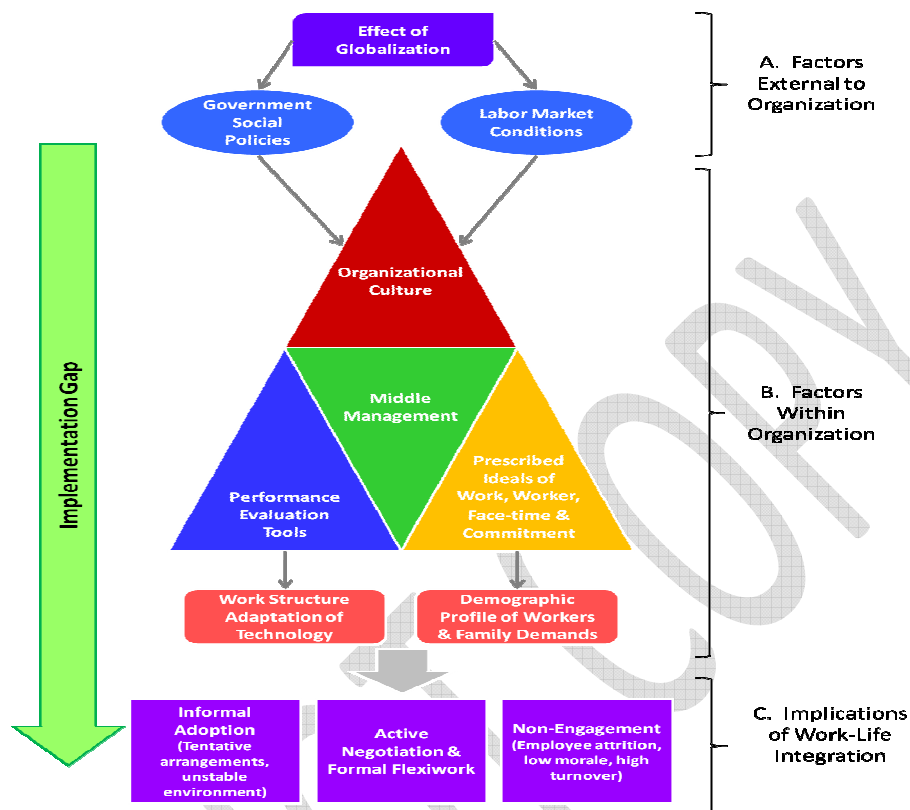
From the macro perspective, there are three main stakeholders directly involved in deliberations on Work-Life Integration policies – the Government, Employers and Employees. The Singapore Government has taken the lead in promoting better engagement between work and family interface through the various national policies and schemes that promote flexiwork in businesses. Likewise, HR policies regarding flexiwork among local businesses also show that, by and large, most firms do practise some flexiwork – either formally or informally. In the case of employees, the diminished presence of a full-time domestic manager has necessitated that more women take on paid work outside the family, with flexiwork as the primary bridge that facilitates engagement in paid work and attendance to family commitments.

While it appears that all primary stakeholders embrace the notion of flexiwork, data on take-up rate suggests otherwise. For example, 35% of businesses in Singapore offered at least one form of work-life arrangement to their staff, with part-time work as the most common option available¹. Yet, the most encouraging statistic we have on flexiwork take-up rate is from part-time work, where the take-up has increased from 8.4% to 9%².

¹ Conditions of Employment, 2010, Paper No. 3/2010, Ministry of Manpower.

² Report on Labour Force in Singapore, 2010, Ministry of Manpower.

The reason for such low take-up for flexiwork when state policies encourage and organizations offer these options has been attributed to an implementation gap. Professor Straughan’s framework guiding the deconstruction of the implementation gap is provided below.



A. *Setting the Stage for Work-life Integration - Factors External to Organization*

Professor Straughan postulated that in Singapore, all three external conditions are favourable for the institutionalization of work-life integration. Pro-family policies are in place. We embrace a global business model supported by a transnational economy. Even in the periods of global economic downturns, we continue to function under a fairly tight labour market (attested by our need to augment the local labour pool with foreign labour). Thus, we would expect that there will be a strong organizational culture that supports work-life integration.

B. *Intra-organization Dynamics: Deconstructing the Implementation Gap*

This segment comprises four key areas which surfaced during the literature review.

I. *Organization Culture*

This deals with the formal organization expectations regarding work-life policies and options available, how they are communicated and the agents who decide on the options, taking into account the organization’s history.

II. Prescribed Ideas of Work

This deals with the governing norms and values which translate into how work is valued (e.g. the definition of “ideal work”, the significance of face-time, and how commitment and overtime work are viewed) which must take into consideration both the prescriptions sanctioned by management as well as the perceived norms and expectations of work requirements of individual employees.

III. The Role of Management

The literature on work-life integration suggests that middle management is often the road-block for implementation of flexiwork options. Some studies report that this is especially so where there exists structural constraints (e.g. insufficient manpower to manage face-time duties when many employees want to work from home), and when short-term output driven KPIs are set for managers.

Hence, middle managers often find themselves in a bind when trying to marry the need for short-term productivity gains and the longer-term need for Work-Life Integration. It is, therefore, important that we understand what middle managers interpret as their deliverables.

IV. Performance Appraisal Systems

The performance appraisal system is the most important means through which management informs employees of the desired and actual performance outcomes.

Before the performance-based evaluation system (PBES) was implemented, traditional modes of rewards were based primarily on seniority and face-time was a significant indicator of loyalty and commitment.

With the introduction of the PBES, employees are evaluated based on output. However, this system is not without issues as well – a lack of clarity and transparency of expectations and evaluation criteria, elements of subjectivity, and the influence of the social context of performance appraisals affect its effectiveness. In addition, the annual cycle for performance appraisal also injects a short-term perspective on job performance.

Therefore, in order to remove barriers to work-life integration, we must engage in three levels of discourse:

- From the organizational level, there must be clear guidelines on how each level of employees is assessed and there must be a finite end product that the employee is expected to deliver at the end of each year.
- Equally important is the perception of supervisors (e.g. an understanding of the job requirements and the ability to make fair and objective evaluations).

- Finally, to understand why employees do not embrace flexiwork options, we must seek their inputs and understand their interpretation of how good performance is documented.

Other factors influencing work-life implementation within the organization include the *work structure and adaptation of technology* (i.e. the need for face-to-face interaction and the ability to expand the office beyond a spatial boundary through the use of technology) and the *demographic profile of employees and family demands* (i.e. the different life stage needs and corresponding family responsibilities).

C. Implications of Work-Life Integration

Employees with family needs typically exercise one of three strategies.

The first is to formally take-up flexiwork options, which can only happen if organizational culture supports this with a fair, transparent appraisal system that does not prejudice those who work in an unconventional manner. With good work-life integration, there is higher retention as an organization with pro-worker philosophies will groom a strong, loyal and committed workforce.

Where formal flexiwork arrangements are not easily available and where employees perceive a lack of support from senior management for work-life integration, employees will resort to the second common option – seek individual solutions informally through a sympathetic supervisor. As long as the arrangements are informal, the organization will never get the opportunity to evaluate the merits of such strategies. Also, employees on the informal arrangement are often tense and have to explain to co-workers their special situation – they may not be able to function optimally, which affects productivity; and in the long run, they may end up leaving the tense work environment.

Finally, in situations where organizational culture is perceived to be hostile towards flexiwork arrangements, employees just continue to work till the stress is unbearable. However, this is not sustainable. Where better job options with good work-life integration surface, they will leave the organization for employers who invest in human capital.

Filling the Knowledge Gap – Professionalization of Part-Time Work

In a tight labour market, it is important that we tap on all available segments that are potential labour. There are two such groups of potential labour that have emerged: older adults and women with family demands. In addition, the advent of the Retirement and Re-employment Act heralds the increased tenure of older employees in the workplace – many of whom may prefer, or need, shorter working hours at this stage of life.

If we are able to mainstream part-time work and flexiwork options, and grant it the status of professional engagement, we will be able to attract, retain and re-employ more people in the labour force, whatever their life stage, personal preferences and family responsibilities.

This article is a summary of key findings from the research study. If you would like more information, please contact admin@employeralliance.sg or call us at 6837 8631.