

Chapter 7

Work Life Balance Issues: The Choice, or Women's Lack of it

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to: provide an overview of the issue of work life balance through a look at the masculine work practices of the long hour's culture, inflexibility work environments, and presenteeism as a cultural norm; demonstrate how work and career development is structured around men and men's lives without taking into account how work practices impact individuals (predominantly women) with caring responsibilities such as childcare or looking after elderly parents/relatives; it explores how parenthood in particular impacts the careers and career development of women, especially those in male dominated occupations; and discusses the research on women who do not have children. Women who do not have children are often overlooked when looking at women in the workplace. The decision whether or not to have children due to career aspirations is much more of an issue for women than men as having children is more likely to impact on the working lives of women. The chapter also shows how 'choice' between career and parenthood perpetuates gendered occupational segregation and certain occupations and industries are less sympathetic to the needs of working mothers.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter would like to consider work life balance issues. Flexible working practices can be a positive means of improving recruitment and retention. Generally, flexible working schedules are expected to provide such organizational benefits as increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment and productivity, and decreased absenteeism and employee turnover. Flexible working may go some way toward improving

staff recruitment and retention and overcoming staff shortages, by providing a means to reconcile work and family commitments. An additional factor that impacts career progression in many organizations is the incompatibility of most senior and managerial positions with child and family commitments. In fact, dependent children can be detrimental to women's careers in many different professions. It is at a great loss to organizations if women choose or are not able to progress to senior, decision-making roles, for both private and

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public organizations. The most effective boards and senior management teams are composed of diverse professionals who contribute their skills and experience. Diversity in gender, age, ethnicity and outlook can offer the organization fresh ideas, insights to problem solving and additional knowledge. A diverse board may also reduce the likelihood of organizational failures. Homogenous groups tend to have homogeneous ways of solving problems, whereas a heterogeneous group is more likely to have a diverse and more dynamic approach to problem solving from different perspectives.

A climate that supports employee growth, empowerment, participation and professional development via training, mentoring and equitable pay for all employees is likely to be associated with a positive public image, and will attract employees and retain staff. Barriers to career progression remain evident at all levels. Whilst women are underrepresented in positions of power, these barriers are likely to persist. The issue of underrepresentation of women in senior and decision making positions within any organization cannot simply be solved by increasing the number of women. More importantly, the contribution that women make needs consideration. As long as valued attributes remain those associated with men, woman's status, influence and economic rewards will largely remain unchanged. The evidence of low representation of women in senior positions is well documented. A climate that supports employee growth, empowerment, participation and professional development is required for growth. This can be achieved via training, mentoring and equitable pay for all employees. This is likely to be associated with a positive public image, attracting employees and retaining staff. This chapter will discuss the main issues surrounding work life balance, that of the long hour's culture and the impact of parenthood, both of which are particularly problematic to the careers of women, especially for women working in male dominated industries. We will also consider the issue of

women who do not have children. Women without children are often overlooked in the literature on women's careers and work life balance issues. Childless women are particularly important to consider in the organizational literature and within this particular chapter of the book, as it is often viewed that many women in professional careers and male dominated industries choose between their careers and motherhood.

Working long hours is often associated with masculine organizational norms (O'Neill and O'Reilly, 2010) and hours worked has been found to be a causal variable, which affects income attainment (O'Neill and O'Reilly, 2010). Work life balance issues have been found to be important to women, including those whose abilities and ambitions lie in SET careers (Frome et al., 2008). Indeed, research by Lubinski and Benbow (2006) found gender differences in the number of hour's people were willing to work, which they argue impacts the career success of women, since men are willing to work more hours per week due to less domestic and caring responsibilities. The issues of parenthood is discussed at length within this chapter since women still hold the main responsibility for domestic labor and child/elder care in western societies.

It is argued that working long hours puts women under greater amounts of pressure and has a greater negative impact on their health and well-being than it does for men (Kodz, Harper, and Dench, 2002; Gareis and Barnett, 2002). Recent research by Walsh (2012) found in a study of hospital doctors in the UK that female doctors were significantly more likely to experience burnout from their work and working hours than male doctors. The study also found that female doctors were more likely to intend to quit their job due to job burnout and the lack of work life balance. This recent research highlights the impact a work life balance, or the lack of it, can have on the wellbeing of women and men. It is possible that the overarching obstacle to achieving a work life balance has been the long hour's culture, which is prominent in many

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