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THE PERCEPTION OF MANAGERS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A WORK LIFE BALANCE STRATEGY: AN EXPLORATORY VIEW

Abstract:

The concept of Work Life Balance has grown in importance in organizations. The challenges of long working hours, work life conflict and social strains are that employees and employers in modern organizations are trying to strike a balance.

Purpose: the purpose of this paper is to investigate the perception of managers on the importance of having a work life balance strategy. The perception of the manager of a start up and that of an established company is analysed.

Design: The study carried out was based on in depth interviews and thus of a qualitative nature. The interviews were semi structured and captured the perception of the managers on the types of work life conflict that arose in the organization, the types of policies implemented to restore a work life balance, the extent to which dissatisfaction could be removed by deling with work life balance.

Findings: The managers interviewed were very clear on the benefits of having a work life balance strategy, the imbalance is a matter of concern and it leads to high level of dissatisfaction, according to the managers. The younger workers, having less ommitments outside work, have the urge to do well and to move up in their career and are thus more willing to have a work weighting heavier in their life. However the existence of work life balance strategy will regulate their lives in the long term. The older workers are more concern about being able to meet commitments outside work and perceive a work life balance strategy as a must for any organization.

Originality: This work is investigating a pertinent human resources issue in organizations. The importance of policies and practices of work life balance have been evaluated and it suggests that there may be a need for regulations. This area of research is still to be fully explored and the work undertaken is a stepping stone for further work.

Keywords:

Perception, Work life conflict, work life balance

Introduction

“Money Rich, Time Poor” seems to be the slogan used by many employees of this century. In the pursuit for success there is a work life conflict which creates an imbalance and can be a cause of a number of human resource issues. Heathfield (2013) defined work life balance as being the ‘ concept that supports employees efforts to split their time and energy between their work and other important aspects of life’. In the highly competitive business environment and the need to perform to high standards the challenges faced at work are various and complex. The employees find themselves spending more time and energy at work than anywhere else. This imbalance creates strain and stress on employees which will impact on the overall performance of organizations. Therefore organizations are today promoting a work life balance strategy to remove this conflict and thus create a high performing workforce.

Literature Review

Work Life balance is of growing interest to researches in the last decades due to changes in the environment, more specifically the economic environment (Green, 2001). The challenges of competition and uncertainty have made organizations more demanding to their employees in terms of performance, commitment and higher expectations (White and al, 2003; Simpson, 2002). This pressure has made employees work longer hours with less time to spend outside work and has brought in reduced psychological and physical well being (Hughes, 2007). The work of Hyman and al, (2003), indicates that the intrusion of work demands into personal life was related with higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. Kinman’ s study (2001) also pointed out that the strongest factor of psychological distress and job dissatisfaction was related to work life conflict.

Organisations have been urged into implementing work life balance strategies to attempt to remove dissatisfaction and days lost in burn outs and stress related issues (Wise and Bond, 2003). Parasuraman and Simmers (2001) considered work life balance to be focusing on the individuals who are in corporate employment and have family obligations. In this same thread work life balance was considered to be gender biased that is more relevant to women (Hardy and Adnett, 2002). This was demonstrated by the work of Ross and Mirowsky (1988) who showed that employed women who had difficulty making child care arrangements suffered from high depression. In these cases organisations have implemented family friendly policies such as crèche and day care facilities, flexible working hours, work share and work from home.

However recent researches have indicated that work life balance is a gender blind concept as it affects both male and female workers. A survey data (Cully and al, 1999) showed that substantially more male workers were working longer hours and working during the weekend. Felstaed (2002) redefines work life balance to be the balance between work and non work related responsibilities, activities and aspirations. Thus work

life balance strategies are gender blind and cover all types and categories of employees irrespective of personal characteristics.

This study on the perception of work life balance strategies was carried in a small island economy which operates in a highly competitive environment due to its economic volatility and distant location. The politically stable environment coupled with incentives for investors have made that the employees have to respond to tight deadlines and a lot of pressure is exercised to maintain a competitive advantage. The legal framework provides for the welfare and well being of employees. The Employment Laws 2008 discusses conditions of work pertaining to welfare and well being in Sections IV and VI. In Section IV the law makes provisions for hours of work, overtime, public holiday work, meal and tea breaks and meal allowances. Other conditions of work pertaining to well being such as transport allowances, leave entitlement, medical facilities and maternity and paternity, is discussed in Section VI.

Method

The study on the perception of managers on the importance of work life balance strategy in an organisation was carried out through in depth interviews of managers of two organisations, one start up and a multinational. A structured interview schedule was used and participants were encouraged to put forward and views. The schedule contained questions concerning the understanding of the work life balance concept, the issues of managing work life balance, the role of organisations in managing work life balance, the strategy of the organization pertaining to work life balance, the impact of the work life balance strategy on employee effectiveness and behavior.

The startup company has been in the financial services sector and in operation since 2010 and has twenty professional employees. The main characteristic of the employees are that they are young graduates who are in their first job. The human resource function is carried out internally and the organisation is still implementing policies and practices. On the other hand the multinational which is also in the financial services sector is a long established organization with over 100 employees. A large number of the employees have been in employment with the organization for above five years. It has a well established human resource management system and since it is a multinational also has inherited its practices from its head office. The human resource strategy is beyond the shores of the small island economy. This paper will make a comparison between the perception in the startup and the multinational since work life conflict is irrespective of size or system and thus the perceptions will be discussed.

Findings and Discussions

The first part of the discussion was to establish the understanding of the concept of work life balance. Both the managers of the startup and the multinational are aware of the

concept of the work life balance and relate it to the balance between 'work commitments and family/personal commitments'. The importance of the work life balance 'varies from person to person depending on what they value most'. The manager of the multinational also adds that 'work is not separate from life, work is about personal development and aspirations.' In other words the perception of the managers is in line with the 'fit' of work into the life.

Upon gathering information about the role of organisations in managing the work life balance, the managers agreed that there is a need to have a work life balance program which will be translated into policies and practices. Such programs are available in the multinational and it includes flexi time, welfare facilities and leave policies. The organization has a policy that employees cannot carry forward leave and thus are 'compelled' to take their annual leave entitlement. Also senior management encourages sports activities by providing gym facilities and wellness training to ensure a balanced lifestyle. The start up company is still in the process of finding the policies which are best suited to its employees since it is a small and made up of young graduates. The manager views facilities such as personal IT tablets, vouchers, paid travel for vacations, gym facilities and flexible work hours are policies to encourage work life balance. However in the startup, the manager is concerned about continuity in the work process. The fact that there are a small number of employees mean that the organization has to be very organized so as to ensure that there is no work disruptions. In cases of uncertainties and changes in work patterns the employees have no choice but to work long hours. The financial services sector being very volatile it is important to maintain a momentum especially at peak business periods. The main concern is to maintain the workflow and in times of low, such as December and January, the company will release all the employees for a longer period of time.

The managers were both very clear and agreeable to the fact that more can be done to encourage work life balance, however the main constraints are the need to maintain the competitive edge and to meet the needs of the business. This does not give the organisations a large gap to be able to ensure employees have a work life balance. The multinational company has a plan to implement its work life balance strategy and this includes policies such as having a hotline for employee complaints and queries, having a company doctor, providing counseling services to employees and implementing a flexi time system. The manager believes that these measures will better support the employees and that they will help employees have a better work life balance. On the other hand the start up is looking to recruit more staff so as to relieve the pressure of work volume but at the same it is looking to have more policies to ensure work life balance. A few policies under consideration are better office facilities, provision of wellness programs such as yoga, flexi time and paid vacation for staff.

Conclusion

The study on the perception of managers on the importance of a work life balance strategy indicates that organisations, be it a startup or a multinational, are concerned about providing policies that are to reduce work life conflict and promote work life balance. To some extent organisations are attempting to find a framework to be able to establish work practices that are conducive to work life balance. However the organisations are confronted with a high number of business challenges and have to maintain competitiveness so as to be long term players therefore they find it difficult to implement work life balance strategy. This study is limited to the study of two organisations and two managers and the focus is to enlarge the study to make it gain a greater insight into the topic.

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