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Abstract

This paper examines how workers spend their non-work time when their work schedule is restructured so that they have an extra non-work day per week. Interviews were conducted in a construction project where the roster was changed from a six to a five-day week. Interviews over time were conducted with fourteen staff, starting when the change was about to occur, then at monthly intervals for the following 3 months. Findings indicated that before the change, staff believed they would spend more time with their friends and family, learning new skills, and relaxing. After the change, it seemed staff were likely to spend their 'extra' free time relaxing, and with friends and family, but reported less actual time learning new skills.

Keywords: human resource development, personnel psychology, work-life balance

Work-life balance has been shown to have positive benefits for individuals and organizations alike. When employees perceive they can better balance their work and non-work lives through the use of organizational work-life balance programs, the benefits have been shown to include: less work-family conflict (Allen, 2001; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1994; Thiede & Ganster, 1995), improved life satisfaction and well-being (Frone, Yardley & Markel, 1997), reduced absenteeism and turnover (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, & Wright, 1999) and higher organizational performance and productivity (Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). However, the availability of even

extensive and generous work-life policies does not necessarily result in widespread utilization by employees (Fried, 1998). This paper investigates what employees do with an 'enforced' roster change which gives then one extra 'non-work' day per week. Previous research has tended to focus on utilization of policies, and outcomes of using these policies. It assumes utilization is voluntary and on an individual basis. This paper focuses on a change that is common across all employees.

Little research has examined what employees actually do with their 'extra' time when they have improved work-life balance in relation to their time. The emphasis in the past has been on increased family time, as the research has tended to focus on women who have dependent children. But we don't really know what employees think they will do with their extra time, nor what they actually do, particularly in a predominantly male sample. This research examines what employees say they are likely to do with their free time, and then follows them over several months to examine what the reality actually is. The literature review will firstly examine work-life balance (including policies and procedures) within organizations, and the implications for organisations and individuals. The review will then examine the 'life' component of work-life balance, including a focus on gender, concluding with the research question driving the research.

Work-life balance

Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) looked at the concept of work-family culture and identified three important dimensions: organisational time demands, perceived career consequences, and managerial support. They also found that a number of employers are introducing programmes promoting work-life balance, yet employees are not taking advantage of them. Data for the study was collected using surveys from

276 graduates from business programmes in the United States of America to test their four hypotheses. It was predicted that employees who are female, married or have children will be more likely to utilise work-family benefits than employees who are male, unmarried, and childless, and that work-family benefits would be utilised more if work-family cultures are more supportive. One hypothesis stated that there would be greater organisational attachment and less work-family conflict for employees in organisations with more work-family benefits. The results supported all of the hypotheses. It can therefore be concluded that work-family culture is an important aspect when explaining work-family policy usage.

While not empirical in nature, a conceptual paper by McDonald, Brown, and Bradley (2005) mention that major work-life policies created by organisations include flexible work options, specialised leave policies, and dependent care benefits in their development of organisational work-life culture as a construct. Research has indicated that work-life programs can contribute to a reduction in work-family conflict and an increase in life satisfaction and well being, benefiting employees as well as businesses which develop work-life policies. However it has been found that employees who need or want to utilise them do not necessarily do so. Organisational work-life culture can be useful in explaining whether an employee decides to take advantage of work-life policies in the workplace.

In a study by De Cieri et al. (2005), work-life balance is explored specifically in Australian organisations in the context of increasing workforce diversity and changing social values. The research questions proposed looked at work-life and the use of them by employees, as well as looking at barriers to the implementation of work-life balance

strategies. Data was collected through questionnaires distributed to HR managers or specialists in 1997, 1998, and 2000. Results found that the most frequent work-life balance strategies were part-time work, study leave, flexibility with work times, working from home and job sharing, though not all employees took advantage of these practices. Factors which were identified as barriers to the effective implementation of work-life strategies included insufficient involvement and lack of communication with senior management, lack of communication to staff, and failure to evaluate impact of programs.

An investigation by Wise and Bond (2003) looks at how organisations in the UK have approached the issue of work-life balance for employees. The implementation of work-life policies was introduced by many companies voluntarily to increase the number of female employees, however changes in legislation also contributed to an emphasis on family-friendly programmes. Data was collected from four case study companies in the financial services industry concerning company approaches to work-life balance and the outcomes for employers and employees. It was discovered that a primary reason for businesses to introduce work-life policies was to recruit and retain quality staff, and for employees, especially female parents, work-life policies attracted them to the organisation. Other outcomes of work-life policies was that it led to staff believing that employers would be fairly supportive about work-life issues, however it was found that there was not workplace equality as male and female employees were not equally represented in managerial positions, and that female parents utilised work-life programmes more than males or non-parents. Results also indicated that female parents were more likely to experience negative career consequences from having a family, and they did not perceive the organisation's culture as being particularly supportive.

A recent empirical study (Lingard et al. 2007) examines work-life balance for employees in the construction industry, as traditionally, construction workers have had to work long hours and on weekends. Research was conducted to evaluate the effect of introducing a reduction in the length of the working week from six days to five days, with an increase in the length of the working day. Data was collected through surveys and interviews from waged and salaried employees on a construction site where a project alliance had been formed. Information was also gathered from employees working on other projects who worked a six day week, identified as a control group for comparative purposes. Benefits of the compressed work week included improved productivity, increased physical and psychological well-being, greater motivation, and increased organisational commitment. The current research also looks at the construction industry where a compressed work week is introduced.

The "life" and gender aspects of work-life balance

The aforementioned research articles provide insight and understanding on work-life balance for employees. However, it appears that there is an aspect of work-life balance which has yet to be explored in the literature. The articles on work-life balance tends to make the assumption that the "life" component of work-life balance only involves spending time on tasks such as spending time with family and caring for dependents. Gender is also an important element of this due to the gendered nature of our societies. For example, McDonald, Brown, and Bradley suggest work-life programs developed by organisations include dependent care benefits. Other articles conclude that female employees with children are more likely to utilise work-life policies, and that organisations implement work-life strategies to recruit and retain females parents. This

focus on family is due to the history of work-life balance and its origins in providing flexibility to females with dependent children. Little research has examined what men would do with better work-life balance (if they were not prime care givers for dependent children). The present research will investigate work-life balance in a male dominated industry.

Wise and Bond (2003) discuss briefly discuss individuals engaging in activities such as sports or artistic pursuits outside work. Perhaps the "life" component of work-life balance should not just be concerned with family commitments but other activities people choose to engage in when they are not occupied with work. This should be particularly pertinent to men. This research investigates what these other "life" components are, and to what extent they include family, in a male dominated workplace.

RQ: Do employees spend 'non-work' time on activities beyond family responsibilities. If they do, what types of activities are they?

Method

Sample

Interviews were conducted with employees from an alliance construction project where a roster change was introduced. A total of 14 staff (4 were female) who were directly affected by the roster change were included in the sample. However, not all 14 agreed to be interviewed 3 times. Therefore, a different number of employees were interviewed for each round of interviews: 10 employees for the first round of interviews, 12 for the second round of interviews, and 9 for the final round. The employees who were interviewed were a combination of waged and salaried staff.

Procedure

The interviews followed a change to the roster to enable staff to work a 5 day week rather than a 6 day week. They had a rotating roster so that the site still operated 6 days per week, but staff each had 2 days per week without needing to work. The first round of interviews was conducted around the time the change was being implemented (which was 6 months after the project started). The second round of interviews was one/two months later, then the third round was one/two months after that. This enabled examination of how the changed roster impacted on what people did outside of work immediately following a change, but then also in the subsequent months. The data was analysed through content analysis of the interview transcripts.

Interview questions

The interviews were semi-structured, with similar questions asked of each respondent, but in a varying order to maintain the conversational flow. Indicative questions include the following:

Tell me, now that you have your weekends off, what sort of things do you plan on doing, do you look forward to doing?(before the change was implemented)

Is there anything else you are concerned about, or anything you might think of as a downside, of working this five day a week roster?

What sort of things are you doing now you have the reduced work days?

Analysis

The data was analysed through content analysis of the interview transcripts, focusing on segments of text. The first round of interviews was read through completely, then individual sections relating to the research questions were highlighted. These were then examined to determine the overall themes. Two of the researchers then discussed the themes and the coding of text and came up with the categorisation system which was

used for the subsequent rounds of interview data. Themes identified in the first round, which were then used for analysis in the second round, were slightly modified based on how useful they were. This process was repeated for analysis of the third round of interview data. The themes identified in the first round are presented in Column 1 in Table 1. The slight modifications at times 2 and 3 are reported in columns 2 and 3 respectively. Table 2 describes each theme and provides some examples.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

Results and Discussion

Several themes emerged which gave an indication of the types of activities individuals engaged in during their non-work time throughout the three rounds of interviews as described above. In the first round of interviews, interviewees mentioned that they spent their non-work time attempting to acquire particular skills, for example driving and sailing; playing sport; spending time with friends by either having a BBQ or playing touch football; relaxing in order to avoid feeling stressed; getting out of town for the weekend, especially when they had a three-day weekend; doing major life events including a wedding; sedentary activities such as reading a book or going to the movies; and spending time with partners, children and other family members.

At the second round of interviews, some of the themes which were stated in the first round of interviews re-emerged. These included sport; spending time with friends; relaxing by sleeping in; the sedentary activity of watching football and having a few beers; and spending time with family. Some comments included, "People are looking for more, people want to live their life more, they want to have the quality time with their

family or their mates or their footy or whatever you know" and "The rest of the guys who have the young families, their balance is well they are getting time to spend with the kids." One theme which was dominant in the second round of interviews was being able to avoid stress and relax. The interviews revealed that an extra day on the weekend allowed people the chance to relax by not engaging in certain activities at all. To illustrate, one interviewee stated, "…more the fact that you get an extra day not being at work." Also, the second round of interviews revealed that some of the employees spent their non-work time performing household chores and running errands.

During the third round of interviews, the theme of spending time with friends was once again expressed, specifically going to the pub and having a few beers, as well as the sedentary activities of listening to music and watching television, spending time with family, and leaving town for the weekend. However, a topic which was referred to consistently was staff members spending non-work time doing exercise, in the form of walking home from work, cycling to work, swimming at lunchtimes or going to the gym.

In summary to answer the research question, the results demonstrate that people want to spend time on things beyond their work and family responsibilities. These things were mainly related to relaxing, spending time with friends, exercising and getting away. However, spending time with family was also reported as an important way to spend their non-work time. Family time was not seen as just a responsibility (although there was an element of this) but was seen as a good way to spend extra non-work time.

There were several main differences between what was reported in round one and subsequent rounds. The first was that people had high expectations about the types of things they will be able to do with their extra non-work day. They tended to be focused

around activity – going away for the weekend, learning new skills, and socialising. When it actually came down to it, much of the actual extra free time was reported to be used for 'relaxing'. Going away for the weekend was still common, but engaging in proactive activity (such as learning to sail) did not seem to be mentioned very much once people were reporting what they actually *had* done with their extra spare time. However, one of the active things which had increased was the amount of exercise that people were doing. This was particularly clear by the third round of interviews when they had experienced the new roster for at least a couple of months. Swimming, going to the gym and walking were the most commonly reported exercise activities. Some respondents reported feeling greater energy as a result of this exercise, which is in keeping with the evidence about the effects of exercise (Hansmann, Hug and Seeland, 2007). Plante, Cage, Clemenyts and Stover (2006) used an experimental design to investigate the effects of outside exercise, indoor exercise and watching exercise on energy levels. They found that actually engaging in exercise lead to feelings of higher energy. This energy has positive benefits for the individual, but also for the organisation, as their work performance is likely to be better. Previous evidence (Iwasaki, Zuzanek, Roger and Mannell, 2001) also supports that exercise is a good stress reducer, which has many positive benefits. They analysed a Canadian National health Survey of over 17,000 people and found that when leisure activity was active, it helped to reduce stress at work. This increase in energy is therefore a positive outcome of the changed roster.

One of the issues which emerged more strongly in the third round of interviews was around flexibility. It was reported very positively that people got the opportunity to do non-work activities at times they may otherwise have had to work, even though they

needed to make up that time later. This enabled them to more easily be able to balance their work and non-work lives.

One of the women reported that even though she did have more time, it was spent on doing things for the family – taking children to sport etc. Fitting with previous research on gender differences, even though she was asked explicitly about the things she did for herself – excluding what she did for her family – she actually spoke about not getting time for herself. Raskin (2006) found that when women felt they had sole responsibility for the household chores, they had greater difficulty managing the multiple roles in their lives. The interview respondent wanted to exercise more, and had worked out how she could do it while the children were at their sport, so that what she wanted to do did not 'impact on the family'. Having the extra non-work time for this employee meant more time spent doing things for the family. This finding was specific to this one person, and was not replicated across the males in the sample. Keene and Quadagno (2004) examined national surveys and found that there was a gender difference on when people perceived greater balance such that women felt they had greater balance when they prioritized the family, whereas men felt they needed time for themselves to feel greater balance.

While on the whole people were positive about the effects of the changed roster on how they were able to spend their time, this was not unanimous. Some employees left the project as they felt they could earn more money by working a longer roster, and this was important to them. One took an extra job on the weekend. One stated in the first round that 'I don't have a home life' and so was not interested in the roster change. Quite a few employees reported that having to work the half an hour extra each day was

difficult, even though on the whole they preferred to do this to get the extra day off each week. These results show that while the majority of people preferred the extra day for non-work activity, this was not the case for all people. There were some for whom working, and associated with that, earning money, was the more important aspect.

In terms of policy and workplace implications, these results support the notion that work-life balance is good for individuals and organizations, and so policies and procedures supportive of improved work-life balance should become more widespread. However, the policies should focus on improved opportunity for flexibility. One set approach will not suit all people or all sections within an organisation. It is important to note, however, that as with all research, this study has limitations. It is a small sample, and is a very specific sample. Further, not all participants agreed to be interviewed each time, so there is some attrition to the longitudinal nature of the data. Also, the project nature of the work in an alliance organisation is different to what might be experienced in an organization which has greater permanency.

Conclusion

We argue that it is important for people to have 'meaningful' lives, and that this meaning can come from many different areas. It seems for most, this is balanced across a number of areas of life, but for some, there is an emphasis on one specific area, such as work. For work-life balance initiatives to be successful for all employees, as much choice as possible needs to be given so that organisational needs are met, but individuals can engage in the activities that give them meaning. These activities are likely to extend beyond family responsibilities.

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Table 1. Themes at each time period

Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
• Skill acquisition		
• Sport		Modified to include exercise

• Spending time with friends
   o BBQ
   o Play touch football		

• Avoiding feeling stressed/relaxing		
• Pottering around the house	Expanded to include; cooking BBQ, brewing own beer and working on garden	
• Getting out of town		

• Doing major life events
   o Wedding
   o Buying a house		

• Sedentary activities (relaxing)
   o Watching football
   o Watching video
   o Reading a book
   o Going to movies
		Combined with theme 'avoiding feeling stressed' as the purpose of the activities seemed similar

• Spending time with:
   o Partners
   o Children
   o Other family		

	Doing household chores	

Table 2. Description of each theme
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concept	explanation
• Skill acquisition	Learning new things such as getting a driving license or learning how to sail
• Sport	Playing sport and doing exercise (with the emphasis being on the physical activity)
• Spending time with friends o BBQ o Play touch football	The emphasis is on the social aspect – the activity itself matters less
• Avoiding feeling stressed/relaxing • Sedentary activities (relaxing) o Watching football o Watching video o Reading a book o Going to movies o Sleeping in	Letting go the worries of the week. Forgetting about work. Trying to recover from feeling tired
• Pottering around the house (Expanded to include; cooking BBQ, brewing own beer and working on garden)	The focus here was on spending time being at home. The activities themselves were less important – it was about being at home
• Getting out of town	Getting away from home and Brisbane. Often included going to the beach and staying away overnight or over the weekend.
• Doing major life events o Wedding o Buying a house	Focused on life events that took a lot of time and energy, and that were important, that they don't do often. These were the 'big' things in life
• Spending time with: o Partners o Children o Other family	The emphasis was on doing things and spending time with family members. Examples included taking children to sport, and going to the zoo
• Doing household chores	Doing the things that needed to get done so the household functioned. For example, vacuuming and mowing the lawn.