

Market Forces, WorkLife Balance and Industrial Relations – the interconnections

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This paper considers growing interest by management in the effective implementation of worklife balance (WLB) policies as a strategy to address ever-increasing labour supply problems. This approach to WLB positions it as a management problem, the outcome of which is related directly to the benefit of the organisation and almost indirectly to the employees. It will be considered within the context of the Western Australian (WA) public sector and report on research across four agencies.

The paper will commence by reflecting on the commonalities in the discourse associated with WLB with that accompanying the industrial relations (IR) legislative changes in Australia over the past decade. As some of the more critical theorists have pointed out, the WLB discourse originates in the context of neoliberalism with its focus on enhancing competitiveness through minimal regulation and reliance on market forces and assumptions about the empowered individual being free to make choices (Fleetwood 2007; Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport 2007). Similar discourse accompanied the IR regulatory changes in Australia, portraying a vision of individual employees and employers negotiating wages and conditions that would best reflect their respective individualized interests. In both discussions ‘choice’ is to be exercised in relation to preferred employment arrangements but of course this language of ‘choice’ and ‘individualised’ employer and employee negotiation ignores the reality of power relations and conflicting interests in the workplace. Management’s role is to maximize the output of the organization in the least costly manner and consequently views WLB policies and practices through this lens.

The paper will then review the previous literature on the critical role played by management to achieve effective work/life balance (WLB) practices. Research has shown that *formally* offering flexible work options and work-family benefits does not guarantee their *availability* to employees (Waters & Bardoel 2006; Bailyn et al. 2001; Thompson et al. 1999; Charlesworth and Whittenbury 2007). Where managers are ambivalent about flexible policies or apply them inconsistently, their usability and meaningfulness is undermined (Eaton 2003).

Management play a crucial role in terms of framing the nature of the problem in WLB. Most commonly the problem is represented as one of individual circumstances and choice. Solutions revolve around developing specific HR policies that provide individuals with options – to work flexible or fewer hours, to work from home, etc. Many researchers have concluded that such an approach ignores powerful ‘institutional forces’ which may operate to undermine the intent of even the most progressive WLB policies by not addressing such systemic factors as work overload, culture of long hours and perceptions of adverse career consequences which result in employees being reluctant to use WLB policies (McDonald et al. 2005; Lonti & Verma 2003; Bailyn and Fletcher 2002; Kossek

et al 1999). Thus such analysts have advocated a much more wholistic approach to the implementation of WLB policies.

The WA public sector context in which the research for this paper is located will then be outlined. This will include, firstly, details of the labour market changes driving management's interest in WLB as an attraction/retention tool and secondly, an outline of the changes that have occurred in the management of the WA public sector over the past two decades. The latter changes, in sum, increased the focus of public sector management on cost and economic efficiency, on outcomes rather than process as well as a less collective sense of fairness and equity in employment relations.

The study used a combination of qualitative research methods and simple quantitative analysis. Relevant policy documents were analysed and extensive data was provided by the agencies' Human Resources sections detailing the profile of their employees and utilization rates for a number of the policies. Information about policy implementation was then obtained through an online employee survey and employee interviews.

The main part of the paper will detail the findings from the four public sector agencies: that WLB policies are being accommodated in a limited way at a level that doesn't disrupt the traditional work and employment arrangements but is far from meeting management's goal of addressing labour supply problems; that there is a high level of managerial prerogative associated with the implementation of WLB practices and a lack of managerial capacity to implement WLB policies more extensively; and that more effective implementation will require more substantial change to eliminate the systemic barriers associated with workloads, job design and organizational culture.

We will conclude with a discussion of whether real change is likely to occur and whether implementation is likely to progress beyond individual solutions. We will argue that WLB has become a 'problem' for management in as much as the real solution to WLB involves changes to the way in which management organises work and employment currently, changes they do not wish to confront.

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