The work–life conflicts of globally distributed software developers

Consider the words of a senior manager in a global IT company:

"I think our company historically has rewarded people who are very technically competent …Those people aren't always the best people-managers….We need people who are leaders, who … set realistic priorities and understand you are going to be most effective as an employee when you achieve a good WLB [work-life balance]…"

The above quote emphasizes a crucial aspect of today's organizational life: that of work-life balance (WLB). As we explored research possibilities with the company, a manager directly said: "if you want to study a real problem that is plaguing globally distributed software development teams, why don't you study work-life balance and help us find some real solutions to achieve it?"

We had not considered the importance of WLB in globally distributed organizations, but the concept sounded intriguing, the challenge was real, and since we were engaged scholars, it seemed like an opportunity that we could not miss. Thus started our journey into the topic, which led us through many countries ranging from "Eastern" nations like South Korea, China, and India to the "Western" nations of Denmark, Finland, UK, France, and the United States, with the help of generous contributions from the aforementioned global IT company as well as the National Science Foundation in the US.

Being relatively new to the notion of WLB, particularly its application to globally distributed IT development, we began by taking stock of the organizational literature on the topic and to assess whether the strategies and recommendations held relevance for globally distributed software development companies and workforce.

We triangulated this assessment with organizational realities by continuing our conversations with companies to understand what WLB meant for them, practices they had in place, and how these practices affected employee morale and performance. It is worth mentioning that distributed IT work brought up several issues that had not been encountered by researchers studying traditional settings.

Our initial results from qualitative and quantitative data across multiple countries led us to conclude that the definition of WLB was not a universal one, and that it varied not just among countries, but between individuals. Three different perspectives emerge on WLB: compartmentalized, overlapping, and encompassing.

Individuals subscribing to the compartmentalized view prefer a total separation of work and personal life and regarded any spillover of work into personal life as undesirable or even unacceptable. Those believing in an overlapping perspective believe that a clean separation of work and personal life domains is neither feasible nor necessary. These individuals assume that although the two domains may have "physical and temporal boundaries," there are "emotional and behavioural" overlaps between the two, and that this overlap leads to each domain affecting the other in positive or negative ways.

Finally, those subscribing to the encompassing view believe that the entirety of an individual's life is embedded within his/her work domain, and any success in the work domain equates to success in the personal life domain. Given the divergent perspectives on WLB amongst employees, it is no surprise that often a single practice adopted by organizations, say, work-life integration, to address work-life balance has typically not been successful in either raising morale or increasing productivity. Our take-away from these findings was that managing the work-life balance of employees needs a more nuanced approach that is tailored to the individual's view about work and life.

How does an organization move forward toward developing such strategies, especially in globally distributed software development work? Wouldn't one first need to know what causes poor work-life balance (or work-life conflict) in this type of work, which is characterized by follow-the-sun approaches to work, complex coordination and communication, fluctuations in software requirements, challenging interactions with clients, agile methodology, etc.? So we investigated factors that affected WLB in this context.

We found that our data challenged many existing myths. Chief among these is that flexibility of work hours, usually touted as the most popularly used strategy by organizations to address work-life conflict not only does little to mitigate work-conflict, but actually increases it. When given flextime, employees feel the stress of not having a set schedule and an ability to commit to personal events in advance. They perceive all of their time to be owned by the organization, thereby adding to emotional conflict.

Another surprising result was the effect of the use of agile methodology in developing software, often viewed as the "magic bullet" in globally distributed software development. While this "light-documentation" methodology can make the processes of software development less cumbersome, the challenges of organizing daily SCRUM meetings among members separated by significant time-zone differences, the incredibly fast speed/acceleration associated with 30-day sprints, and burdens of weekly burn-down charts adds to (rather than reduces) work-life conflict.

The ultimate goal in this journey was to provide guidance to organizations on how to develop strategies that might help mitigate the challenges highlighted above. Underscoring the importance of doing so was the finding that low WLB tends to increase turnover. While recognizing the difficulty of developing strategies for each individual employee, we believe that certain overall strategies that compensates for the differences in perceptions surrounding work-life balance can be helpful. These include additional compensation (e.g., four days off after a four-month long project), separation (no-work weekends and evenings), and integration (helping individuals seamlessly blend work and life by providing life-related facilities and activities within the work environment.

Furthermore, while organizations must pay heed to the undesirable impacts of imbalance, and continually strive to monitor and reduce these effects, they must also keep in mind that forcing a balance with rigid policies can be counterproductive, because the unintended consequence of such policies is often even more imbalance and stress.

A process-based dynamic approach that is sensitive to the changing tensions and is based on an empathetic understanding of an employee's situations holds more promise. In the end, what really matters is the degree to which the organizational culture remains true to the spirit of the WLB concept, because attaining the ideal of balance may always remain an elusive dream.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' papers Work–Life Conflict of Globally Distributed Software Development Personnel: An Empirical Investigation Using Border Theory, Information Systems Research, 2018, and Managing Employees' Use of Mobile Technologies to Minimize Work/Life Balance Impacts, co-authored with Xiao Xiao, MIS Quarterly Executive, 2012.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of*

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