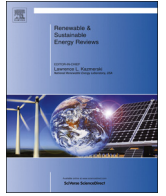




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Sustainable human resources: Examining the status of organizational work–life balance practices in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

In recent years companies are increasingly becoming aware of the need to have policies and practices that lead to sustainable workforce and embrace the concept of work–life balance and appreciate its importance as a tool to improve employee productivity, satisfaction and retention. The topic has great significance especially in the context of modern business world that is characterized by highly competitive markets and higher focus on sustainable organizations. This paper explores the status of work–life balance policies and initiatives in various business organizations within the national context of United Arab Emirates. A qualitative multiple case study approach is adopted to identify various elements of work–life balance initiatives, related outcomes and moderating factors in the business, social and cultural context of the Emirates. Employee and management perspectives are investigated to arrive at common and differing themes and meaningful conclusions. A research model is proposed for future research in this direction.

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1. Introduction

In order to facilitate optimization of productivity, it is very essential that sustainable organizations have effective strategies to manage their most valuable human assets in the right manner [18,49,55,64]. To that end sustainable societies and organizations should focus on ensuring a good balance between employee work and life roles [60,47,39,78]. This topic has great significance especially in the context of modern business world characterized by highly competitive business practices [4,25]. Work–life balance (WLB) practices are deliberate organizational initiatives designed to minimize work–life conflict of employees and enable them to be more effective at work and in other roles [45]. In recent years, companies are increasingly becoming aware of the need to embrace the concept of work–life balance as an important tool to facilitate sustainable human resources, which is found to be very important to attract and retain talents [25,69]. One method through which employee productivity can be significantly increased and improved is by promoting flexibility in the workplace [77,64]. Increasing number of employees is furthering their education while working on their jobs [66,24]. Therefore, it is important that employers ensure that the work life and career goals of their employees balance with their ‘life’ (pleasure, health, spiritual development, and family). The absence of such a balance will lead to work–life conflict [5] and will result in stressed employees with emotional exhaustion that in turn leads to more errors and inefficiency [10,48,77].

One of the barriers to effective work–life balance initiatives is attributed to work cultures that reward and promote long working hours and career progression [16,77]. Other barriers include isolated and unsupportive work environments, supervisors’ and senior management’s attitudes and resistance, and lack of awareness, education and communication of work life balance strategies [16,77].

This paper explores and examines the status of WLB initiatives within the under-studied Middle-Eastern context. The research covers the UAE business environment from various perspectives attempting to give a clear picture to enable comparison with that of western contexts. Finally the paper proposes a model for future research to investigate the inter-relationships between various WLB initiatives, and of their impact on employee productivity, commitment and satisfaction. This research project was funded by Abu Dhabi University.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work–life balance: conceptualization and operationalization

Work life balance (WLB) initiatives refer to various modifications in the working system so as to acquire a healthy balance between the work life and personal life of employees [48]. This balance gives employees a way of accommodating requirements of both work and personal activities that are important for their personal and social well-being [16]. All the work–life balance initiatives globally are primarily aimed at helping employees achieve a self-determined, self-defined state of well-being that allows them to set objectives/goals in order to effectively manage multiple tasks in a responsible manner in the workplace, the community, and at home [54]. In order

for this balance to be achieved, it is important that the individual in question enjoys the right to a fulfilled life outside and inside the workplace. In addition, in order to mutually benefit the employee, the organization, and the society as a whole, the WLB arrangement should be designed strategically, and respected and accepted as an organizational norm and work culture [54].

Organizations are highly concerned about improving the productivity of their human capital and retaining them [77]. As a result, organizations are now seeking new ways to incorporate flexibility in the workplace to improve the agility and flexibility of the organization and its employees [16]. Responding the needs of the competitive market and the changing customer tastes and preferences, organizations have been undergoing several changes in the organization structure and jobs, which in turn seem to have necessitated the need to implement work–life policies. For example, in Australia, with more organizations adopting less hierarchical and more participative structures, it became necessary for organizations to adopt WLB programs to deal with the resultant increase in the workload that needs to be handled by less number of employees [77]. Previous studies indicate increasing desire among employees to add more value to the quality of life than the monetary benefits that organizations offer [58,54].

2.2. Work–life balance – different arrangements for one purpose

Different organizations have come up with various strategies to satisfy the need for flexibility and work–life balance of their employees. However, the choice of the strategies depends on the type of the industry and the nature of specific jobs [16,48]. There are clear indications in the literature that one size WLB program may not fit for all; therefore, companies adopt differential schemes addressed at different issues faced by different employees at different stages of their professional and personal lives. A review of the WLB literature provides various flexible working arrangements, leave provisions, and childcare provisions [17]. These differential programs include term-bound provisions (such as childcare eligible until a specific age of the child); temporary provisions (such as responding to a family or health crisis); or permanent provisions (such as medical health insurance). Some of the key WLB provisions in the literature are summarized below.

2.2.1. Flexi-time

Flexi-time arrangements enable employees to take part in determining their work day start or end time, by ensuring that they work for a stipulated number of hours per day. It is proposed that flexi-time is one of the most popular ways of increasing flexibility at the workplace. It works best with all WLB schemes and can be used as part of various WLB options offered and, at the same time, for organizations to meet their business objectives [46].

2.2.2. Time-off-in-lieu (TOIL)

TOIL refers to employees accepting to work for longer hours during the periods of peak business seasons where higher man-hours are required, and take time off later to compensate the extra

time worked [61]. Employees working longer hours during peak business seasons accumulate additional hours as eligible leaves that can be availed later, usually during off-peak seasons where manpower requirements are relatively lower. There are evidences in the literature that employees appreciate time-off-in-lieu rather than receiving bonuses or monetary rewards that the organization might offer in place of the extra hours contributed [54,8].

2.2.3. Telecommuting

This type of work flexibility allows the employee to have arrangements with the employer to either work from home or from another location outside the workplace [8]. With the advancements in information technology coupled with globalization, many organizations consider telecommuting as a tool to solution to reduce the office space costs and also transport and mileage allowances [34,28,14,57]. Allowing workers to work remotely from home has notably helped organizations in enhancing work-life balance as well as retaining employee talent resulting from increased employee satisfaction and better balance between work and personal life [6,38,33].

2.2.4. Compressed work week

Compressed work week is a system in which an organization makes arrangements with its employees to work for longer hours per day or shifts and compensating employees by having lesser weekly working days [8]. Under this arrangement, employees are involved in longer working days or shifts but for lesser days of the week. This option results in employees enjoying extra days off a week, or longer weekends [45]. Lazar et al. [46] illustrated examples of this arrangement, i.e., in a forty-hours-work week; three days will be off with four days working for ten hours per day; other alternative includes working an extra hour a day with one day off every two weeks or working an extra half hour a day and having one day every three or four weeks off. This system found to have improved employee productivity [51].

2.2.5. Part-time work

Part-time work involves people who are employed on a part time basis; they work for a fraction of the day or for less than forty hours a week and then resume their personal duties [11,3]. Under this arrangement, people with disabilities and health problems, and working mothers have a chance to take part in the job market and gain experience [45]. Part-time work also helps bringing about gender equality since mothers are given the opportunity to work without sacrificing their domestic duties [19].

2.2.6. Staggered hours

Under this arrangement, employees follow flexible schedule in which each employee starts the job at his convenient time. In this kind of work flexibility, the work start time, breaks and end times are different for different employees [33]. It is a type of work flexibility where the numbers of working hours are numerically determined and the stipulated hours are spread differently [20]. Here, various employee working hours are mapped with the organizational working schedule and may involve either part-time, hourly shifts that may spread during day, night or weekends. It may also include temporal leaves with the aim of accommodating the required results [20].

2.2.7. Job-sharing

This involves contractual agreements where any given two employees voluntarily share a full time job between themselves [45]. This implies that the gross salary for the job is shared between the employees who shared the job. Doellgast et al. [19] argued that job sharing could benefit employers as well by improving staff retention, increasing productivity and combining a wider range of skills and experience in a single job. In some

cases, such an arrangement could also provide additional manpower coverage during busy and peak business periods [45].

2.2.8. Annualized hours

Through this method, employees are able to choose their preferred hours and days of work within a certain time boundary [61]. The working time of an individual is calculated on an annual basis, and then spread across the annual period in the form of various shifts, days, weeks, and months. In this arrangement, employees are given the freedom to distribute these annual hours according to their availability and are, therefore, able to balance between work and life very well [37].

2.2.9. Child-care provisions

This refers to fully or partially employer-sponsored childcare assistance to employees [15,25]. This helps to improve productivity, efficiency, and morale of employees [41,23,27,24]. The argument behind the logic of providing such benefits is that childcare problems conflict with employee efficiency at work (Kossek, [40]) [15,24]. In addition, such initiatives help improve employees' perceived organizational support as this is an act of care given to employees' personal needs and in turn strengthen the employee-employer relationships [23,41,13]. The organizational childcare plans are determined by demographic backgrounds of their employees, organizational culture, and the external environment [41]. There are evidences in the literature that such initiatives lead to the positive organizational culture, employee satisfaction, and employee retention [41,24,13].

2.2.10. Leave provisions

The leave provisions represents fully paid, partially paid and unpaid leave provided to employees to take care of their various needs such as leisure, childcare, medical care, educational, etc. [24,75]. Studies show that provision of various kinds of leaves such as family, medical, and leisure can lead to employee satisfaction, motivation, and better personal and family well-being [39,27,41]. According to Human Rights Watch [36], a well-defined leave policy helps employees have sufficient time to attend family and life issues. Literature shows that most of the countries worldwide have legal regulations which mandate organizations to provide various types of leaves to their employees. UAE labor law is very strict in implementing its comprehensive leave provisions and mandates all organizations in the country to follow the leave provisions. Examples of leaves covered as per the UAE labor Law include compulsory fully-paid annual leave, weekly holiday, education leave, maternity leave, medical companion leave, compassionate leave, and leave for Hajj pilgrimage (UAE Labor Law, [73]).

3. Organizational outcomes of work-life balance initiatives

Literature shows evidences for a close association between WLB initiatives and employee productivity and motivation [30,45]. Organizations that have implemented work-life balance programs are also likely to address employee retention woes [71]. In addition, a good WLB program would help to reduce absenteeism [44]. There is an increasing trend of WLB initiatives worldwide and more and more research evidences support the association between WLB programs and improved employee retention, employee engagement, employee performance and commitment, and improved labor recruitment [37]. Whilst WLB arrangements are not the only factor contributing to employee engagement and retention, it is widely recognized as an important factor [32,33]. Although the literature articulates the positive impact of WLB initiatives on both employees and employers, accurate assessment of quantifying the benefits WLB practices bring to the organization is often challenging. This is due to the problems of

measuring various qualitative initiatives and their related benefits. The need to find the variables that could help quantify the direct or indirect influence of work–life balance on organizational outcomes is important to such a judgment [22,45].

4. Control variables – bridging the gap between the multi-levels theoretical analysis

Since, failure to implement WLB practices at the workplace may lead to negative effect on an organization's performance [50], the present study conceptualizes different factors that are related to the adoption and the implementation of various WLB initiatives. These variables may be addressed and analyzed at multiple levels such as national level, organizational level and individual level to examine their nature and magnitude of relationships and their impacts on organizational outcomes.

The UAE has 9.2 million population with 80% of the country's population being expatriates living in the UAE (World Bank, 2014). The adoption of the market economy and globalization coupled with the development in technology and communication played important roles in the work–life initiative adopted by organizations in the UAE [1,79,70]. The *Emiratization* program (up-skilling of the national workforce) is an integral part of UAE business environment which must be considered while discussing the WLB practices in the UAE [26,56]. The growing number of UAE national workforce, both male and female, has generated pressure on companies to reduce their use of foreign labor. With 80% of the labor force being represented by expatriates, *Emiratization* is a strategic and planned effort to reduce dependency on foreign workforce by increasing the proportion of the nationals (*Emiratis*) in country's workforce (Suliman, [70]). Forrest [26] argued that HR managers in the UAE face challenges to bridge the gap between the company's strategic objectives of hiring UAE nationals with line managers' expectations to recruit fully qualified workers, for which nationals are in short supply. Thus, many of the UAE organizations have begun to seriously take a second look at their current recruitment practices as well as to their work–life balance policies and arrangements as a tool to attract more *Emiratis* in to their workforce [2]. This has a significant relevance in the light of the economic crisis and its resultant impacts on the business organizations in the country. In the near term, it is expected to have more restrictions on foreign hiring. Indeed, the suspension or cancellation of numerous investment projects has contributed to a mass exodus of foreign workers from the UAE [12,74].

Literature indicated that more research needed to be conducted across industries to create conditions that encourage human resource departments of Middle-Eastern organizations develop social relationships and WLB practices [72,12,74]. The notion of “wasta” (power and influence) is another specialty that still holds strong in the UAE [52]. Personalities and networks play a significant role in the business environment and workplace networking. Tlais and Kauser [72] illustrated that balanced “wasta” remains embedded in the culture and its influence in the career advancement of individuals' business and social lives is unlikely to be diminished in the near future despite the perception that it is an unfair practice.

Beauregard and Lesley [4] argue that the managerial support, peer assistance, and workplace characteristics are vital to be considered for analyzing the organizational-level factors (Meso-Analysis). When managers and supervisors are positive and serious to embrace the WLB practices, it becomes easier to be implemented and accepted by their employees [54]. Conversely, negative attitude of managers towards the WLB plans is found to be negatively affecting the acceptability of such initiatives by the employees. Furthermore, negative perceptions of career consequences may also hinder the implementations of the work–life practices at the workplace [58]. When employees view that the WLB practices may negatively affect

their future career progressions, they feel demotivated to accept and avail such practices. Several studies have indicated that employees who have embraced the work–life practices are often the victims of negative perceptions from superiors and colleagues [4].

Concerning the individual factors (Micro-Analysis), there is a widely held perception that the work–life practices have been developed specifically to suit the needs of the female employees [50]. The prevailing culture in many workplaces is that men have no legitimate claim to family responsibilities. For example, many employers argue that the issue of childcare is best left to women [24].

5. Research questions and proposed model for further investigation

Considering the literature on various initiatives available for facilitating work life balance as a foundation, the present study attempts to examine the status of WLB initiatives and policies in the United Arab Emirates. This attempt is significant from the perspective of exploring the under-studied Middle-Eastern context. This study is expected to shed lights on building the foundation for our future research and testing the model proposed in Fig. 1. The research objectives for the study are listed below:

1. Exploring the status of work–life initiatives in an under-studied non-western cultural context (i.e. the UAE).
2. Exploring the effect of these before-mentioned different levels and variables upon the implementation of the work–life initiatives in the UAE.
3. Exploring the effect of the WLB initiatives on the different organizational outcomes such as employees' commitment, satisfaction, retention and engagement.

6. Methodology

The present study is qualitative and exploratory in nature; therefore, it employs a qualitative paradigm. This is specifically beneficial when a researcher needs to clarify his understanding of a situation or a problem, samples are usually small, and sampling is guided by theoretical rather than probabilistic considerations [35,63]. In addition, the study uses a case study design that has a valuable contribution to make in many ways [81], especially in situations where knowledge is shallow, fragmentary, incomplete, or even non-existent, that is expected to make an important contribution as a grounded base for further research on the same topic and in the same context, or in any other similar contexts [29]. The nine industries covered in this study are airlines, media, oil and gas, railway, real estate, renewable energy, nuclear energy, education, and tourism. A total of 14 companies were chosen covering cross representation of industries that are considered as the strategic areas for the country's *Economic Vision 2030*. The distribution of the representation of sample units across the selected industries is shown in Fig. 2. The companies that have highest market share in their respective industries were chosen to be qualified to be included in the sample. Semi-structured interviews were used for primary data collection. The interviews were dictated by the progression of theory development, known as theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, [65]), covering a total of 38 senior managers. Semi-structured interviews of 2–3 h involved a list of pre-determined as well as open ended questions [67,21]. The data collection was done in 2012–2013.

On top of that, the study drew on content analysis to guide the researcher in analyzing the qualitative data [42]. Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid

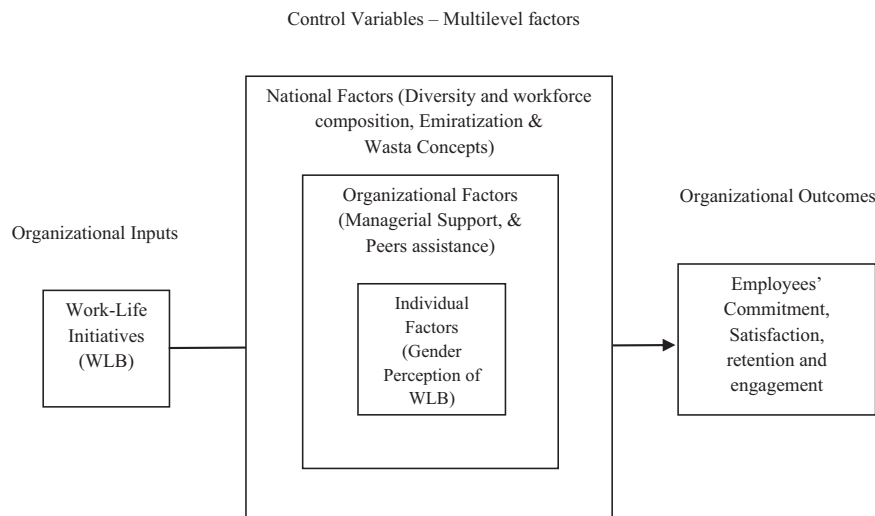


Fig. 1. Proposed research model and conceptualization.

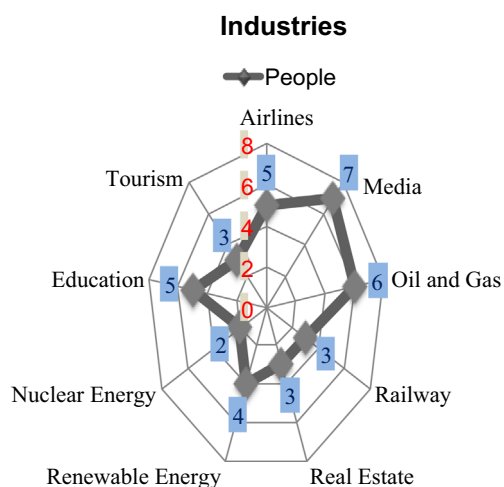


Fig. 2. Distribution of sample elements.

inferences from text, and can be used for many purposes, including coding open-ended questions. Content analysis possesses some advantages generally associated with qualitative methods such as richer detail, preservation of greater context information, and the potential for joint-learning development [76]. More specifically, a goal of theoretical sampling is to select cases that replicate/extend cases, and theoretical reasons that fit into different theoretical categories and/or provide examples of polar types [62] (Strauss and Corbin, [65]). As a result, researchers jointly collected, coded and analyzed interview data, then decided which participants to interview next. Interpretation of interview transcripts is based on multiple readings of each transcript in order to include a holistic picture of the managers' stories, followed by a section-by-section reading of major thoughts all through each transcript. Each transcript was dealt as part of a larger whole, consisting of multiple transcripts. Each of the 38 managers are considered as a separate case [9,59]. In the whole cases, interpretations of sections are constantly compared to each other and to the whole. Continuous modification of concepts and definitions was linked to precise keywords and lines within transcripts. Codes, categories, and interpretations were incorporated into theoretical frameworks that contain "within case analysis" where multiple sources of data within one case are used [7,31]; each source is chosen to be analyzed first on its own (Yin, [80]), to become familiar with each case before making comparisons and drawing conclusions. The "cross case analysis" was done when the within-case analysis was completed,

where researchers dealt with these multiple sources of data as one whole case that helped in developing conclusions, implications for practice and future research agenda (Miles and Huberman, [53]).

7. Results and analysis

Interviews were conducted with 38 management representatives in 14 different organizations operating across nine leading industries. The major findings are summarized in the following paragraphs.

It was found from the study that the motivation behind the introduction of WLB initiatives was mostly to improve the labor competitiveness. This theme was found commonly agreed by about half of the cases observed. An example of the supportive citation from the interview transcripts says: "Our work-life provisions are in place mainly for retention, companies can do something on employee work-life balance, and it helps in retention of employees, mainly high performers."

The work-life balance initiatives could be designed by organizations with or without participation of their employees. The study shows that there are several organizations in the UAE that do not involve their employees in the designing of work-life programs, the WLB drives in these organizations were initiated by the top management with the intention of employee retention. Organizations also believe that top management support is critical in rolling out WLB initiatives. It was found that, even for the WLB proposals that impacted at the lower or middle level managers "getting the buy-in and the support from the top management is a must even with small-scale initiatives on work-life balance which are proved to have good impact on the employee satisfaction and retention worldwide."

Some of the WLB initiatives such as flexible working hours, days-off-in-lieu, etc., were observed to be carried out as the personal choice and preference of the line managers and without much formal policy documentation at the organizational level. This practice was seen in more than half of the organizations participated in the study. The following responses indicate a sample of such practice: "We don't have a formal work-life balance policy at the organizational level; however, various departments do deal with it differently and there are several departments in our organization that allow flexi-time and days-off-in-lieu within the authority limits of the departments"; another quotes, "we do allow in certain jobs to have an early start and leave early in a more informal way. In our organizations this option is mostly used by female employees and those who are studying"

It was surprising to note that instances were reported, from about 80% of the organizations covered in the study, that employees perceived suspiciously and negatively some of the work–life balance initiatives offered by their employers, especially during financial recession. Examples of such WLB initiatives include compressed workweek, and time-off-in-lieu. The citations from the interviews that support the argument include: “managers feel that job structure and the way of managing tasks and people in organizations have been formally established through traditions and practices, and employees come to the organizations with a mindset of working and they do not expect the company to worry about their personal life”; a manager said, “when employees were offered their flexi-systems such as time-off-in-lieu, there was a rumors among the employees about the financial position of the company, and some employees worried that company is not doing good and employees were going to lose their jobs”.

The study revealed a growing interest among organizations to embed various WLB initiatives in their organizations. The concept of WLB is well-known and appreciated by UAE organizations at the senior management level, which has reflected in the directions given to HR department of many organizations covered in the study. Organizations showed interest to initiate and formalize work–life balance programs in the long-run and in a strategic way. Almost all the respondents have agreed that the need for formal WLB initiatives has increased in their organizations and many of them started to hire HR specialists who have insights into WLB issues. Organizations are trying to use combinations of policy change, formal benchmarking, informal discussions and social change arguments to adopt more progressive and embedded WLB policies into their organization. A few of the respondents opined that: “WLB is evolving gradually, it needs a strategic planning and long-term vision for successful implementation, if you make quick changes, this may not result in serving the purpose and may create conflicts with the organizational functioning and objectives”.

There were obvious organizational and environmental factors found to be acting as barriers to the successful implementation of WLB initiatives. With the dominance of a multi-cultural and very diverse workforce in the country, managers and employees are found to have diverse expectations, work habits, and preferences. Respondents stated that “majority of UAE organizations nowadays have a good understanding of what an ideal work–life balance should be like; however, not many have found a way to balance the merits and demerits and especially with the low level managerial and co-workers support”.

Technology is perceived to be contributing to the neutralization of some of the WLB initiatives by invading into employee lives without any limits. Almost all the respondents agreed that this is one of the important barriers to the successful facilitation of employee work–life balance. The study further revealed that majority of the respondents find it difficult to maintain a good work–life balance in the UAE. Most of the respondents check emails and involve in work-related telephone conversations during the weekends and after work hours. Examples of some of the citations in this regard include: “I sometimes find myself checking emails even when I’m out for dinner with friends”; “people find themselves thinking about work when at home, how to meet deadlines, working after hours and during weekends, staying overtime at work, and checking emails 24/7 on their smart phones and thus carrying office all the time”; “technology makes employees always connected to the workplace”; “technology is acting as a tool to control employees 24/7 resulting to agitation, frustration, unhappy families and mental health issues.”

The study reveals that there is a lack of awareness among employees in the UAE about the importance of balancing their work and life for achieving sustainable human productivity and long-term well-being. One of the main attractions for the UAE labor force is the country’s model of attractive tax-free salary and

other monetary benefits, however, but quite often they are enjoyed at the cost of personal, family and social lives. One of the respondents who is an HR manager, opined that “the vast majority of the employees are working harder to develop themselves, climb the career ladder.” With a very high proportion of expatriate workforce, coupled with relatively short-term employment arrangement practices, long-term job security is a concern for employees especially among the expatriate workforce. Therefore, employees try to perform their best at work to continue their employment, which in turn acts as barrier for the successful facilitation of WLB practices. The following citations support this argument: “even after working hours, employees in the UAE struggle to find balance because they are constantly thinking and worrying about their unfinished work tasks”; “employees sometimes claim that even when they need to take a day off to attend to personal matters, they feel worried about doing so and their thoughts often lead them back to work”; “in order to get the full benefit of WLB initiatives, it is a must to build an organizational climate that creates some sort of job security within the framework of employment regulations in the country”; “there is no need to feel worried to enjoy our rights, but we do”; “it is a matter of awareness and the employees need to understand the significance of work-life balance programs and contributions of such initiatives to their long-term sustainable performance in their organization and outside”; “I have moved to the UAE with a willingness to work harder with an attraction for monetary benefits, it’s a tax-free salary that can buy better quality of life, however, I have not yet thought if the earnings are at the expense of my long-term personal and social lives.”

UAE culture being socially well knit, family-related provisions are embedded in the fabric of the national and work culture. One respondent who is a Human Resources Director viewed that culture expresses and reflects the need for work–life balance, and it is verbalized and practiced in most of the organizations in the UAE. Another respondent stated: “getting permission to leave work for urgent personal issues is granted and peers and line managers offer help and support.” She added: “This is due to the nature of the culture of the country and the importance given to the relationships and family”.

Challenges to work–life balance initiatives also include determining appropriate trade-off between their relative merits and demerits to the organization. Citations from the interviews say that “the most recurring advantages observed include increased productivity and increased motivation and employees assume more incentives to come to work.” Other things mentioned include “reduction in absenteeism, reduced traffic and parking issues, increased employee energy levels at work, higher employee engagement, increased creativity and involvement in group problem solving and discussions, improved perceived organizational support, better social image, and reduced stress levels.” Respondents also opined that “failing to implement the work-life balance initiatives may lead to less satisfied employees and employee turnover that are concerns for the achievement of long-term sustainable human resources.” Disadvantages of the WLB practices were also reported in the study such as “having flexible work hours proves to be a barrier when arranging meetings, and fixing work schedules, but the success depends on the nature of the work as well.” Some managers found that “this can be frustrating to employees that may be asked to come earlier than usual or leave later than they do.”

Some of the findings related to various WLB arrangements observed in the study are summarized as follows.

7.1. Flexible hours

Although, majority of the organizations in the UAE do not practice flexi-time arrangements and tend to stick to official working hours, a few companies were found that are practicing

flexi-time with a deliberate intention to help balance their employees' work and life. From a very practical point of view, the options offered are observed to be varying from company to company. The flexible hour options range from half-hour to three hours depending on the nature of business, job requirements, policies and practices. Employees argued that flexi-hours did not create any big impact in the lives as they were still working the same number of hours per day; however, majority of the employees in those companies were increasingly making use of the flexi-hour option offered. On the other hand, several participants agreed that flexi-time benefited to minimize traffic jams and parking issues as it allows people to commute to work at different timings. Moreover, it was perceived that flexi-time helped them increase their productivity in both work and life and also led to having lesser absenteeism, saving the company's health costs, and availing parking spaces. For majority of the respondents, flexi-time is found to be helpful to attend to family and personal issues during work days.

7.2. Overtime and time-off-in-lieu

Although most companies do offer overtime, it is usually targeted at employees in lower grades and non-supervisory positions. Time-off-in-lieu is found offered in many organizations for all the employees, but is mostly used by employees in non-supervisory positions. However, our study revealed that, one of the companies surveyed had formal policies that mandate use of time-off-in-lieu as a means of compensating for the extra hours worked. By the nature of their jobs, some employees needed to stay longer after the scheduled working hours and since they belong to higher job grades that did not entitled for overtime pay but rather asked to take a mandatory time-off-in-lieu. This is found to be a good initiative from the perspective of work-life balance practices.

7.3. Telecommuting

In the UAE, telecommuting is an idea that is not so practiced at the moment; however, there were some indications towards this direction. Some companies consider practicing this in specific situations. A few companies in our study did implement this approach to a specific group of employees and allowed them to work from home under certain conditions and with the consent of their line manager and on specific days in some cases. The idea is gradually been found welcoming and practiced with key women employees who need additional leave due to situations such as maternity, childcare, elder care, etc. Employees who availed this option were working from home as if they were working in office, performing usual office tasks such as accessing files through SharePoint, sending and receiving emails and also attending telephone calls. Existence of an excellent tele-network infrastructure along with the best in class internet bandwidth makes UAE very appropriate for facilitating this initiative to appropriate jobs and personnel.

7.4. Part-time work

Not until very recently has the UAE ministry of labor approved part-time work permit which is mainly aimed at students and women. The Law defines part-time working as a unit of weekly work that is less than the standard 40 h week. In the UAE context, contracting or temporary working arrangements also come under the purview of part-time working. Nowadays, it is considered as a good WLB initiative as it helps to save labor costs and improve flexibility for both employees and employers.

7.5. Job sharing

Contrary to Western contexts, job sharing is not formally found used in the UAE, except for very limited situations and a few specific job categories such as teachers and medical doctors, that too after meeting the regulatory permissions. This has been attributed to the fact that some of these practices are not applicable due to the UAE labor law restrictions, organizational culture and the nature of the industry and job.

7.6. Compressed working hours

Although Compressed working hours are not much seen in the UAE, its applicability is mainly found to be dependent on the nature of the work and industry. A few manufacturing units under study were found to be using such an option. Compressed working weeks provide a longer weekend and increased leisure opportunities for employees. Some employees, however, found this practice difficult to adjust as long weekend and longer daily work hours during compressed work weeks made them feel fatigue.

7.7. Leave provisions

The employment regulatory framework in the UAE is very keen on implementing policies for protecting both employee and employer rights, which is perceived by many managers as a limiting factor in organizational flexibility in successfully implementing WLB initiatives. However, employees see this as a protective mechanism to minimize exploitation by organizations and to facilitate a basic work-life balance requirement in the country. Parkers and Langford [58] propose that organizations should formalize policies that target work-life balance; which, in turn, promotes a supportive, nurturing and meaningful environment that accommodates employees work expectation and personal life demands. Our study shows that such a formalization of organizational WLB policies and practices in the UAE is still in the infancy stage, and most of such policies are limited to abiding the UAE labor law on different types of leaves such as education leave, maternity leave, paternity leave, sick leave, medical escort leave, compassionate leave, and Hajj pilgrimage leave. In addition, weekly work-hours limits, mandatory weekly and annual vacation are also mandated by law and applicable to all organizations in the UAE. This supports the arguments of Human Rights Watch [36] that regulating and enforcing employee working hours will provide sufficient time to attend employee personal life matters, and hence contribute to the achievement of employee work-life balance.

8. Discussion

The appropriateness of work-life balance initiatives is determined by various variables such as nature and the demography of the workforce and the cultural and legal framework in the local and regional business environment. There are some specific arguments about some of the modes of work-life balance initiatives available for organizations to choose. In certain cases these initiatives support and go along with what is stated in the literature in the field, in some other cases modified or differing scenarios are observed.

The study reveals that, in the UAE, majority of the employees seem prioritizing their work ahead of their personal and social roles. It is worth noting here that about 80% of the country's workforce are expatriated who moved to this country for better livelihood and are attracted by tax-free compensation. This indicates a new assumption towards the work-life balance literature that there are sizable workforce in the UAE who are attracted towards monetary rewards and prefer to work more sacrificing their personal and family time. On the contrary, there are clear

evidences from the study that more and more organizations are realizing the importance of WLB initiatives for achieving sustainable human capital in the long-run, and hence strategically initiating several WLB initiatives in their organizations. Moreover, the country's legal framework is found to be very keen on implementing employment regulations that are aimed at sustainable human capital by facilitating a healthy work environment and eliminating any kind of unhealthy work practices. Surprisingly, although the majority of the employees found to have a higher preference towards monetary rewards and career advancement, there were clear evidences from the study that, when given options to use some of the WLB initiatives such as flexi-time, a sizable employees were making use of these initiatives and benefiting from such options. However, employees, regardless if they were married with children or single, seem to prioritize their career, which sometimes causes imbalance in family and social lives. People find it hard to balance both work and life, although many believe that their work and career is very important; however, in order to be sustainable, they need to balance other roles in life which is challenging at the moment. The situation explained above provides new insights to the researchers, organizations and policy makers towards finding ways to effectively implementing initiatives to facilitate a healthy work culture and maintaining sustainable human capital.

Challenges to work–life balance initiatives observed also include the quantitative assessment of the benefits such initiatives bring to the organization. The concerns about fairness and equity in accessing flexible work arrangements have been raised and discussed by almost all the participants. This revealed that some of the main advantages of WLB initiatives observed by the managers include increased employee morale, better job satisfaction, self-motivation, reduced absenteeism, employees are able to manage their work stress; and organizations are able to recruit the best possible talent. Almost two-third of the participants agreed that increased employee satisfaction, motivation and engagement are the major outcomes of their WLB initiatives. Whilst flexible work arrangements will not be the only factor contributing to employee engagement, it is widely recognized as an important contributing factor. On the other side, a sizeable participant said that these initiatives contributed to reducing absenteeism and turnover. This supports the argument of [71] and Summer (2007) that the flexible nature of the work leads to higher employee motivation, increased loyalty, and decrease in the rates of absenteeism. Of course, less absenteeism could also be used as an indicator of overall mental and physical health of employees, and may contribute to a long term reduction in the cost of employee health care [68,43]. One of the interesting results of this study is the need to assess the work–force health and well-being as a quantifying measure of successful WLB implementation. In principle, employees and managers are aware of the negative outcomes of low work–life balance and possible burnout due to higher work/life related stress. In about 84% of the organizations, their WLB arrangements covered some sort of health and well-being aspects. The study has also reported some instance of the negative outcomes derived from some of the WLB arrangements implemented such as compressed work-week, and flexible working hours that caused people higher stress due to long working hours, irregular working hours, lack of common free time with their family members, demands from customers and traditional administrative requirements.

As for the current status of the WLB initiatives in the country, most organizations (82%) described it as progressing over the recent years but at a slower pace. Some of the organizations agreed that the current form of their WLB initiatives is not well-documented at the organizational level; however, there are evidences that they are practicing WLB initiatives in informal ways at the line manager and

supervisory levels in several departments. Several line managers use such flexible work practices at their discretion and are found to be working good for their relevant department and the employees.

One of the noticeable trends observed in this study includes the changing demands and acceptability for informal and formal WLB arrangements in the UAE business environment. More than half of the managers said that they have observed an increase in requests for flexible work arrangements from employees, especially from mature workforce and working mothers; it is worth noting that in most of such cases, the managers responded favorably to such requests. Furthermore, the respondents were unanimous that one of the key factors influencing the successful implementation of WLB program is the presence of formal policies and top management support.

In addition, the study also highlighted that the flexible work arrangements offering differed from one industry to another where part-time working, study leave, paid leave for religious holidays and maternity leave are more readily available in the governmental sector, whereas choice of shifts from round the clock shift options, job sharing and flexible work hours are more observed in the private companies.

The attitudes and behaviors of managers and senior administrators are observed to have a significant impact on the ways in which flexible arrangements are implemented within work teams. The data from this study suggested the emerging need for educating managers and employees about the appropriate WLB practices they can use within their teams. Interestingly, the issues related to top manager's attitudes towards WLB initiatives are a matter of concern as almost half of the respondents agreed that they were hindered by top managers in implementing some sort of flexible working arrangements for their employees; however, some of the respondents said that there are several cases in which the manager explained the situation clearly and was able to convince the top managers. On top of that, about 50% of the participants have emphasized that there is a need for peer support and line manager support to benefit from these WLB initiatives. However, the data shows a positive shift in perceptions on the importance of employee work–life balance.

Given that there are a few organizations that had formalized WLB initiatives, a majority were informally practicing some sort of WLB initiatives and flexible work arrangements. It is recommended that organizations come up with a broader policy and procedure, such a paradigm shift would contribute great improvement in the current status of WLB initiatives in the UAE and the region.

To sum up, the study argues that there are diverse ways through which WLB can be promoted in an organization; however, the WLB initiatives may face a number of issues. These issues have not been given much attention and have not been addressed seriously, but dealing with these issues may need a further exploration. Despite the fact that many organizations do encounter problems with flexibility, there is not much information available on how to reduce or control the problems that arise. Hence, there is a need to come up with necessary measures in order to reduce, control, and eventually solve these problems.

9. Research limitations and future research agenda

The study was limited to the UAE and due to its previously noted exploratory intent, it focused exclusively on only nine industries with 14 companies. Generalizations made from case–study approach have limited validity. However, the veracity of coding and identification of themes is warranted in future studies. Another limitation relates to the self-selection of participants. This research is a preliminary investigation intended to provide a foundation for next stage research which will be geared towards theory development pertaining to test the impact of UAE

diversified workforce on the success of work–life arrangements. This will be done using a quantitative approach in a longitudinal study where more cases with more participants are studied.

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