

Work–life balance or work–life alignment?

A test of the importance of work–life balance for employee engagement and intention to stay in organisations

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ABSTRACT

In an Australian sample of over 16,000 employees we assessed whether employees are satisfied with their ability to balance work and other life commitments. We tested the hypothesis that work–life balance is important for engaging and retaining employees in the context of other aspects of organisational climate. We also explored how individual and organisational variables were related to work–life balance aiding further development of theory integrating work with other aspects of life. Results showed that of 28 organisational climate factors, work–life balance was least related to employee engagement and intention to stay with an organisation. We discuss implications for how organisations position work–life balance strategies, particularly in relation to social responsibility and wellness, rather than the solution to employee commitment and retention.

Keywords: work–life balance; employee engagement; retention; social responsibility; organisational climate

Work–life balance is defined here as an individual's ability to meet both their work and family commitments, as well as other non-work responsibilities and activities. Along with Sturges and Guest (2004), we use a deliberately broader term than previous research on work–family balance (eg Saltzstein, Ting & Saltzstein 2001), or work–family conflict (eg Frone, Russell & Cooper 1992), in growing recognition of the desire of all employed people, regardless of marital or parental status, to achieve

a healthier and more satisfying balance of their roles and responsibilities.

There is a plethora of research demonstrating the importance of work–life balance (or work–family conflict) for the health and well-being of individuals and families (eg Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brinley 2005; Frone et al 1992; Pocock 2003). Work–life balance is related to reduced stress and greater life satisfaction, with some indication that the relationship is strengthening over time (Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton

2000). In addition, although role-conflict theorists attributed this relationship to the 'balance' between multiple roles as a buffer for negative experiences (Marks & MacDermid 1996), it appears to be the place of work in the rest of life which has a major impact. Whereas an emphasis on family (in terms of time, involvement and satisfaction) is related to higher quality of life, imbalance caused by a greater emphasis on work has a negative effect on quality of life, mediated by increased work-family conflict and stress (Frone et al 1992; Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw 2003).

There is some evidence of increased pressure on work-life balance in Australia's relatively long working hours (ranked second longest in the OECD), the increase in non-standard working hours, a growing number of employees who would prefer fewer hours than they currently work and the shift from male-breadwinner to dual-earner couples and single-parent households (Bittman & Rice 2002; Jacobs & Gerson 2001; Thornthwaite 2004). It is generally contested both in research literature and popular media that working men and women in Australia are dissatisfied with their current levels of work-life balance and are actively seeking to attain a 'better' balance through changes in work hours and arrangements, moving to 'family-friendly' organisations, or more radical 'sea change' type shifts (eg De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott & Pettit 2005; Fox 2006; Russell & Bowman 2000; Schmidt 2006; Smith 2006; Thornthwaite 2004).

Traditionally, work-life balance has been seen as an issue for individual employees, with organisational efforts at improving work-life balance focusing on programs aimed to help employees better manage their home life (for example, childcare or counselling). However, with growing awareness of the current skills shortage and war for talent, a subtle shift has been observed in the arguments for work-life balance, from responding to individual employee needs to a broader based business case (Russell 2002; Thornthwaite 2004). Proponents argue that work-life balance contributes to employee engagement (job satis-

faction and organisation commitment), which in turn contributes to higher productivity and lower organisational turnover (Grawitch, Gottschalk & Munz 2006). For example, De Cieri et al (2005: 92) argue that any organisation aiming to increase competitive advantage must 'develop the capability to attract, motivate and retain a highly skilled, flexible and adaptive workforce' by 'an approach to HR and work-life balance strategies that cater for the diverse needs of the workforce'. However, Lewis, Rapoport and Gamble (2003: 830) contend that the 'business case, in many situations is deeply flawed, and there is a need to be more honest about this'. Indeed, some assertions that work-life balance will increase the motivation and retention of a talented workforce have been made on the basis of anecdotal, rather than empirical, evidence (eg Pocock 2005).

Consistent with this strategy to attract and retain a diverse workforce, work-life balance is often considered more important for women (who continue to bear the burden of domestic duties), older employees and the younger 'work to live' generation 'Y' (De Cieri et al 2005; Pocock 2005; Schmidt 2006). Behson (2002) found some evidence to suggest that family-friendly work cultures were slightly more important for satisfaction and commitment for women than men, and parents than non-parents. However, there is emerging in the literature a consistent lack of findings in this area. For example, when controlling for organisational variables Sturges and Guest (2004) found age, gender, marital status and dependent children had no effect on work/non-work conflict. Similarly, Greenhaus et al (2003) did not find any moderating effects of gender, parenthood and career aspirations on relations between work-family balance and quality of life.

Given the high level of interest in work-life balance among researchers, practitioners and commentators, we aimed to: (1) empirically investigate employees' satisfaction with work-life balance and (2) to test the impact of work-life balance (compared to other aspects of the work environ-

ment) on employee engagement. In addition, we wanted to explore how work–life balance is situated in relation to other aspects of the work environment to help managers effectively integrate work–life balance strategies within a broader organisational context. Thus, our third aim was to examine individual and work variables that might moderate or mediate the relationship between work–life balance and work outcomes (Allen et al 2000).

Linking work–life balance to organisational outcomes

Despite a prevalent belief to the contrary, there are a number of studies that have failed to find a significant relationship between work–life balance and organisational outcomes, or have reported mixed and even negative effects (Bruck, Allen & Spector 2002; Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne 2007; Kossek & Ozeki 1998). In their meta-analysis Allen et al (2000) found moderate correlations on average between work–family conflict and both job satisfaction ($r = -0.24$) and organisational commitment ($r = -0.23$). However, individual study results were highly inconsistent (ranging from $+0.14$ to -0.47). These inconsistencies in the existing literature linking work–life balance with organisational outcomes may stem from both theoretical and methodological short-comings.

First, finding a direct link between work–life balance and organisational outcomes has rarely been the result of rigorous theory development or testing (Eby et al 2005). The few exceptions have relied mostly on concepts such as the psychological contract (Rousseau 1995) and social exchange theory (Settoon, Bennett & Liden 1996), which predict for example, organisational citizenship behaviour in return for perceived usefulness of work–family benefits (Lambert 2000), or inversely, dissatisfaction with and lower commitment to work due to perceived imbalance in workload and hours commensurate to rewards (Sturges & Guest 2004). However, while there may be a direct link between work–life balance

and employees' satisfaction, commitment and intention to stay with an organisation (based on the above theories), this is likely to be small compared to the impact of other organisational factors. For example, while extolling the virtues of flexibility in the workforce, Bond, Galinsky and Hill (2004) actually found that flexibility was least related to the item 'I am willing to work harder than I have to, to help my company succeed' of their six criteria for 'effective' workplaces. In comparisons of workplaces high and low on flexibility, the percentage of highly engaged employees differed by 10%, as opposed to differences of 20–36% for the five other effective work practices (these were job autonomy, learning opportunities and challenges on the job, supervisor and co-worker support for job success, and involvement in management decision-making).

Rather than a direct link, we suggest that work–life balance is more likely to benefit an organisation indirectly through those well-being factors found to be consistently and strongly associated with it, that is, work-related stress and burnout (Allen et al 2000; Eby et al 2005; Fox & Dwyer 1999). Other aspects of organisational climate appear to interact with, and support, this relationship. For example, work–life balance is positively related to the perceived fairness and support of supervisors (Nielson, Carlson & Lankau 2001; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills & Smeaton 2003), organisational understanding of family needs (Allen 2001; Saltzstein et al 2001) and support for out-of-work activities and responsibilities (Sturges & Guest 2004). Yet Frone, Yardley and Markel (1997) found that support from supervisors and co-workers appeared to reduce work-to-family conflict primarily by reducing work distress and work overload.

Certainly, one of the strongest explanatory variables for work–life balance is the length of working hours, with work–life balance higher among those who work fewer hours (Dex & Bond 2005; Parasuraman & Simmers 2001; Sturges & Guest 2004; Thornthwaite 2004; White et al 2003). Although often considered at

the individual level, longer and more intense working hours can be attributed to 'high commitment' management practices and expectations of prioritising work over other responsibilities (Frone et al 1997; Hand & Lewis 2002; Peetz et al 2003; Russell & Bowman 2000). There is some evidence that practices encouraging high commitment and performance such as performance appraisal systems, quality circles, training and career development can affect pay, promotion and effort in a way that negatively impacts work-family balance (Lewis, Gamble & Rapoport 2007; White et al 2003). According to role-conflict theory, high job involvement (and presumably high organisational commitment) entails greater time, effort and preoccupation with the work role which detracts from an employee's ability to fulfil the demands of other roles (Frone et al 1992; Hammer, Allen & Grigsby 1997; Parasuraman & Simmers 2001). For example, Adams, King and King (1996) found that workers who reported higher levels of job involvement were more satisfied with their jobs, but also reported higher levels of work-family conflict.

The complex relationship between work-life balance and other aspects of organisational climate highlights the inadequate design of much of the research in this area. The majority of studies that have empirically examined the impact of work-life balance policies (or satisfaction with work-life balance) on work-related outcomes have tested this relationship in isolation. For example, Marks and MacDermid (1996) surveyed 65 employed wives and mothers in the United States. They found that role-balanced women (those scoring high on the single item: 'Nowadays, I seem to enjoy every part of my life equally well') were higher on 'work productivity' as measured by a single self-report item. The impact of role-balance was not compared to any other work-related variable (no others were measured). When studied alone, work-life balance strategies, family-friendly culture and higher work-life balance can, and usually do, demonstrate a positive correlation with an employee's

job satisfaction, organisational commitment and citizenship and decision to remain with an employer (Allen 2001; Burke 2001; Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne 2007; Greenhaus, Collins, Singh & Parasuraman 1997; Haar & Spell 2004; Kossek & Ozeki 1998; Lambert 2000; Macran, Joshi & Dex 1996; Netemeyer, Boles & McMurrin 1996; Saltzstein et al 2001; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness 1999). However, the limited scope of these studies rarely allows for tests of mediation, nor do they assess the importance of work-life balance in the context of other aspects of the work environment.

To our knowledge, only three studies have examined the impact of work-life balance on employee outcomes in the context of other organisational variables. For example, in a sample of 147 employed American students, Behson (2002) examined the impact of family-friendly work cultures on work-family conflict, job satisfaction and organisational commitment in comparison to three broader aspects of the work climate. While perceptions of family-supportive cultures affected work-family conflict, they did not significantly impact job satisfaction and commitment when controlling for perceived organisational support, fair interpersonal treatment and trust in management.

Greenhaus et al (1997) investigated reasons for organisational departure among 310 accountants with moderate home responsibilities (either married or with children). They found that, rather than work-family conflict, work overload and career advancement aspirations predicted turnover intentions (other work-related variables included career development opportunities and advancement expectations). While women were more likely to leave than men, this was attributable to differences in their career aspirations.

Finally, in a study of 280 graduates in the early stages of their career, Sturges and Guest (2004) found that while graduates professed work-life balance was very important to their intentions to stay with their organisation, work/non-work conflict, fulfilment of psychological contract and

number of hours worked did not significantly predict organisational commitment. Only organisational support for out-of-work activities was positively related to organisational commitment. By contrast, which organisation the graduates worked for (five in total) and functional work area accounted for three times the variance in organisational commitment than all of the work-life balance variables. While not measured directly, this suggests that other aspects of the organisation and immediate work climate have a greater impact on organisational commitment than work-life balance.

Hypotheses

In addition to assessing employees' satisfaction with work-life balance compared to other organisational climate factors, we aimed to test the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a. Work-life balance is positively related to overall employee engagement (including job satisfaction and intention to stay), however:

Hypothesis 1b. Other aspects of organisational climate are more strongly related to employee engagement than work-life balance.

To explore further proposed organisational correlates of work-life balance, we made the following tentative predictions.

Hypothesis 2a. Work-life balance is positively related to work practices promoting individual and community health and well-being such as wellness (management of stress and workload),

the importance placed on safety, fair treatment and support from supervisors, help and support from co-workers, support for diversity, and ethical and social responsibility.

Hypothesis 2b. Work-life balance is negatively related to organisational commitment and 'high commitment' work practices such as career opportunities, performance appraisal, and a focus on results.

METHODS

Participants

This study was part of a larger project investigating organisational climate in Australian organisations conducted by The Voice Project at Macquarie University¹.

In six waves of data collection over the years 2002 to 2006, samples of approximately ten employees from 1535 work units² completed anonymous surveys (total of 16,813 respondents). Participation of organisations and their employees was voluntary, with consent required from the manager of each work unit and his or her participating employees. In return for their participation, managers received a report summarising the results for their work unit, benchmarking their results against all other organisations participating in the study in the same year.

Most of the participating organisations were in the private commercial sector (83% of sample), 11% were public sector, and 6% not-for-profit organisations. A broad range of industries were represented, with the largest being retail trade

¹ The ethical aspects of this research were approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). Voice Project is a research and consulting practice based at Macquarie University. Non-commercial research is conducted through Macquarie University and commercial research and consulting is conducted through Voice Project Pty Ltd, a legally independent company owned and directed by Dr Peter Langford, operating under licence of Access Macquarie Ltd, the commercial arm of Macquarie University.

² Participants were recruited by business and organisational psychology students using the survey for an assignment as part of their course requirements. Instructions and consent forms requested that employees surveyed be part of a single work unit or department within an organisation. The exact number of different organisations is not known because organisations were given the option of anonymous participation, however from available data it could be estimated that approximately 20% of work units across all waves of data collection were from organisations already represented by other work units. It is very unlikely that samples were repeatedly surveyed over the years.

(21%), accommodation, hospitality, tourism, cafes and restaurants (12%), finance and insurance (9%), and information and communication technologies (8%). Approximately 82% of the organisations had the majority of their employees based in Australia or New Zealand.

Demographic variables were not collected in 2005, however, across the rest of the sample 52.5% of respondents were female, and 47.5% male. In terms of age, there was a larger proportion of employees in the 20–29 year age bracket (42%), probably reflecting our method of data collection as part of a business course for students.

In terms of employment type, 60% of participants were full-time employees, 14% were part-time, and 15% long-term casuals. The remaining 11% were contract or short-term casuals. Most employees (56%) were in managerial or professional occupations, while 44% were clerical or service workers, tradespeople, labourers and others. In terms of education, 36.5% of employees held a Bachelor degree or above.

Measures

‘The Voice Climate Survey’³ measures 31 different aspects of organisational climate and employee outcomes. Our conceptualisation of organisational climate, and this measure, refers to the more visible or tangible level of organisational culture represented by shared perceptions of work structures and practices, which in turn reflect deeper levels culture such as shared values and beliefs (Hofstede 1991; Rousseau 1990). A total of 102 items are rated on Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with an additional option of ‘don’t know/not applicable’. The survey shows strong factor structure and internal reliability, with an average alpha coefficient of 0.82 (Langford 2007). To give an idea of the content covered in the survey, the work practices aggregate into higher-order work systems labelled as Purpose (including practices such as direction, ethics and

role clarity), Property (including resources, facilities and technology), Participation (including employee involvement, recognition and development), People (teamwork, talent, motivation and initiative), Peace (wellness and work–life balance), and Progress (achieving objectives, successful change and innovation, and satisfied customers).

‘Employee engagement’ is a robust higher-order outcome measure included in the Voice Climate Survey (Langford, Parkes & Metcalf 2006) which measures a composite of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intention to stay on ten items (Cronbach reliability coefficient = 0.92). Construct validity for this measure of employee engagement has been demonstrated by significant correlations with organisational reports of annual turnover and absenteeism (Langford 2007).

‘Work–life balance’ is measured on four items: ‘I maintain a good balance between work and other aspects of my life’; ‘I am able to meet my family responsibilities while still doing what is expected of me at work’; ‘I have a social life outside of work’; and ‘I am able to stay involved in non-work interests and activities’. It demonstrates good internal reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.86. The work–life balance climate scale has shown good divergent validity with an average correlation with other scales of $r = 0.25$ (compared to an average inter-correlation between climate scales of 0.41).

Demographic variables measured included age, gender, family structure, occupation type and work type (see Table 1 for categories), number of hours worked per week, number of overtime hours per week, salary band, seniority (on a scale of 1 = ‘front line worker’ to 9 = ‘senior executive’) and tenure with current employer.

RESULTS

We have reported most results in user-friendly terms of average percentage favourable (% Fav),

³ The Voice Climate Survey is copyrighted for commercial use, but freely available to researchers for not-for-profit use. For a copy of the survey, detailed description of survey development and psychometric properties contact the authors.

that is, the average percentage of respondents responding 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to the work-life balance items. However, all tests of statistical significance were performed on means scores. Given the size of the sample, even small differences were statistically significant. As such, results showing no significant differences between groups stand out for their consistency. Details of post-hoc Tukey HSD comparisons and significance levels are available from the first author.

Satisfaction with work-life balance

Table 1 shows mean scores and percentage favourable figures for the overall sample and some sub-groups. Nearly three-quarters of the overall sample were satisfied with their work-life

balance (73% Fav). Compared to the other aspects of organisational climate, satisfaction with work-life balance ranked fifth highest (behind teamwork, support for diversity, results focus and role clarity). Employees were least satisfied with opportunities for career development, participation and involvement in decision-making and cross-unit communication and co-operation.

We tested the robustness of these results for sub-populations grouped by age, gender, family structure, occupation type (managers and professionals versus others) and work type. Although there were some statistical differences between groups, these were mostly fairly small. For example, managerial and professional employees rated their work-life balance slightly lower than other employees, and

TABLE 1: RATINGS OF SATISFACTION WITH WORK-LIFE BALANCE

		n	Mean	0.00	% Fav
Total sample		16784	3.96	0.80	73
Occupation	Manager/Professional	3313	3.94	0.80	73
	Non-Manager/Professional	2588	4.04	0.80	75
Gender	Male	6015	3.91	0.80	71
	Female	6643	4.03	0.78	76
Age	Younger than 20	959	4.08	0.80	75
	20-29	3948	3.99	0.80	74
	30-39	2166	3.89	0.79	71
	40-49	1473	3.92	0.79	73
	50-59	765	4.05	0.75	79
	60 or older	124	4.39	0.70	90
Employment Type	Full-time permanent	3902	3.88	0.79	71
	Part-time permanent	909	4.08	0.75	77
	Contract / fixed term	284	3.92	0.74	73
	Long-term casual (>12 Months)	950	4.15	0.73	79
	Short-term casual (<12 Months)	438	4.11	0.75	77
Family type	Single with no dependent children	6086	4.02	0.79	74
	Single with dependent children	726	3.86	0.80	70
	Married or de facto with no dependent children	2266	3.96	0.80	73
	Married or de facto with dependent children	3212	3.93	0.78	73

Note: Not all of the sub-group category data were collected every year, hence some do not add to the total N. No demographic information was collected in 2005.

women were more satisfied than men with their work–life balance ($P < 0.001$). Those between the ages of 30–49 were significantly lower on work–life balance than all other groups, and the over 60s enjoyed significantly higher work–life balance than all other groups. Parents had slightly lower work–life balance than non-parents ($P < 0.001$), mostly due to lower ratings for single parents. Single employees with no dependents enjoyed the greatest work–life balance compared to couples (with and without children) and single parents. Part-time or casual employees reported significantly higher work–life balance than full-time permanent and contract/fixed term employees.

There was virtually no movement in overall satisfaction with work–life balance over the years 2002 to 2006, except for a slight decrease in satisfaction between 2003 and 2004 (from 75% Fav to 73% Fav, $P < 0.05$).

Relationship between demographic variables and work–life balance

Number of hours worked, overtime hours worked, salary, seniority and education level were all negatively correlated with work–life balance ($r = -0.19, -0.18, -0.10; -0.08, -0.06$, respectively, all $P < 0.001$).

To further investigate the impact of individual variables on satisfaction with work–life balance, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. Following a logical order of influence, age and gender were entered in step one, parental status and employment type in step two, followed by hours worked and overtime hours in step three and all other individual variables in step four. Since different demographic data was collected from year to year, a single regression analyses with all of the variables was not possible. A separate regression including education level and occupation type (managers/professionals versus others) showed that neither of these variables accounted for additional variance in work–life balance after age, gender, parental status and hours worked (not shown here).

As can be seen in Table 2, the number of regular and overtime hours, along with age, parental status and salary independently predicted work–life balance. Nevertheless, all of the individual variables entered only accounted for 7.5% of the variance in work–life balance.

Tests of mediation following Baron and Kenny (1986) demonstrated that employment type completely mediated the impact of gender on satisfaction with work–life balance⁴.

TABLE 2: MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES PREDICTING WORK–LIFE BALANCE

		Beta	ΔR^2
Step 1	Gender	0.05*	0.002*
	Age	0	
Step 2	Gender ^a	0.02***	0.03***
	Age	0.09***	
	Parental status ^b	-0.11***	
	Employment type ^c	0.15	
Step 3	Gender	0	0.04***
	Age	0.13***	
	Parental status	-0.10***	
	Employment type	-0.02	
	Hours worked	-0.23***	
	Overtime hours	-0.10***	
Step 4	Gender	0.01	0.003*
	Age	0.11***	
	Parental status	-0.10***	
	Employment type	0	
	Hours worked	-0.25***	
	Overtime hours	-0.10***	
	Salary	0.07**	
	Seniority	0.02	
	Tenure	0	

Note: $R^2 = 0.075, P < 0.001$

^a Males = 1, Female = 2

^b Non-parents = 1, Parents = 2

^c 1 = Full-time Permanent & Contract/Fixed Term,

2 = Part-time Permanent & Casual

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$

⁴ Not included here due to space limitations. Contact the first author for tables of these results.

That is, women were more likely to be working part-time or casual and their reported higher work-life balance could be completely attributed to their employment status. Further, while part-time/casual work was associated with higher work-life balance, this was entirely mediated by number of hours worked, as unsurprisingly, full-time employees worked significantly longer hours.

Similarly, older employees were also more likely to be parents. When parental status was controlled, age was a positive predictor of work-life balance. Thus, work-life balance generally increases with age, except for a drop between the ages 30–49 due to the impact of dependents.

The number of hours worked was the biggest predictor of work-life balance, even controlling for full-time versus part-time work status. While measured and analysed here as an individual variable, the number of hours worked is often claimed to be strongly influenced by organisational culture. Analysis of the variance of hours worked within and between organisational units revealed that, indeed, there was greater variance between organisations than within organisations on hours worked (see Table 3).

Importance of work-life balance for employee engagement

Correlations between all the different aspects of organisational climate and employee engagement are shown in Table 4. Consistent with Hypotheses 1a and 1b, although all of these were positive and significant, of the 28 climate scales, work-life balance showed the smallest correlation with engagement. Instead, engagement was highly correlated with the management of change and

degree of innovation, belief in the organisation's mission and values, satisfaction with rewards and recognition, successfully achieving organisational objectives, participation and involvement in decision-making, career opportunities, competence of and communication with leadership, and employee perceptions of customer satisfaction with goods and services.

We conducted a multiple regression analysis to test if work-life balance accounted for any variance in engagement independent of the other aspects of organisational climate. When controlling for other aspects of organisational climate, higher satisfaction with work-life balance actually predicted lower engagement (see standardised betas in Table 4). In particular, wellness appeared to almost entirely mediate the positive relationship between work-life balance and engagement (partial correlation when controlling for wellness = -0.03 , $P < 0.01$)

To investigate differences in the importance of work-life balance for engaging different groups of employees, we conducted similar multiple regressions according to gender, age, occupation, employment type and family type. Given the similar patterns of ratings for age groups and employment types, some of the categories were combined for analysis (see Table 5). Work-life balance was not a significant positive predictor of engagement for any of the sub-groups. To test for significant differences between the groups, separate hierarchical regression analyses for each individual variable were conducted with the interaction term entered after the direct effects (not shown here, eg gender and work-life balance were entered in step one, followed by the interac-

TABLE 3: ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE BETWEEN AND WITHIN ORGANISATIONS FOR NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED PER WEEK

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F
Between groups	880204.96	894	984.57	11.68***
Within groups	718673.72	8526	84.29	
Total	1598878.68	9420		

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$

TABLE 4: CORRELATIONS AND MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR CLIMATE VARIABLES PREDICTING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

	Correlation with engagement ^a	Beta
Change and innovation	0.58	0.15***
Mission and values	0.57	0.20***
Rewards and recognition	0.55	0.14***
Organisation objectives	0.52	0.08***
Involvement	0.51	0.09***
Career opportunities	0.51	0.17***
Leadership	0.51	0.01ns
Customer satisfaction	0.50	0.05***
Supervision	0.47	0.04***
Ethics	0.47	0.03**
Organisation direction	0.47	0.00ns
Recruitment and selection	0.47	-0.02*
Performance appraisal	0.46	0.00ns
Wellness	0.45	0.09***
Resources	0.45	-0.01ns
Learning and development	0.44	-0.03**
Role clarity	0.44	0.08***
Motivation and initiative	0.42	0.08***
Cross-unit cooperation	0.41	-0.07***
Results focus	0.41	0.00ns
Safety	0.41	0.02**
Diversity	0.41	0.00ns
Technology	0.40	0.01ns
Processes	0.39	-0.07***
Talent	0.38	0.00ns
Facilities	0.37	0.02**
Teamwork	0.34	0.03***
Work-life balance	0.21	-0.08***

Note: $R^2 = 0.56, P < 0.001$

^a All correlations were significant at the $P < 0.001$ level

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$, ns = not significant

tion term gender x work-life balance in step two). Interaction terms were significant for employment type ($\Delta R^2 = 0.001, P < 0.05$), parental status ($\Delta R^2 = 0.003, P < 0.001$) and age (<30 versus 30-49, $\Delta R^2 = 0.004, P < 0.001$; <30 versus 50+, $\Delta R^2 = 0.001, P < 0.01$). As indicated by the correlations in Table 5, work-life balance was more important for engaging full-time and contract employees than part-time and casual

employees, and for parents (both singles and couples) than non-parents. Of the non-parents, work-life balance was more strongly predictive of engagement for couples than singles ($\Delta R^2 = 0.001, P < 0.01$). Finally, work-life balance was less important for engaging employees under 30 than for older age groups.

Relationship between work-life balance and other organisational climate variables

To explore the relationship between various aspects of organisational climate and work-life balance, we conducted a multiple regression analysis with each of the climate scales, including the subscales of engagement: job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intention to stay. Correlations and regression results are shown in Table 6. Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, the strongest predictors of satisfaction with work-life balance were wellness and flexibility, followed by teamwork, role clarity, resources, rewards and recognition, and safety. Job satisfaction was a small (but significant) predictor of work-life balance. Work-life balance was also significantly predicted by diversity and supervision as hypothesised, but not ethics.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, organisation commitment was associated with lower work-life balance. Intention to stay with the organisation had the smallest correlation with work-life balance. As hypothesised, performance appraisal and career opportunities were significant negative predictors of lower work-life balance, as was consultation and involvement in decision-making.

DISCUSSION

De Cieri et al (2005) report that over 95% of Australian organisations have implemented some kind of work-life balance strategy. Nevertheless, few workplaces have a high proportion of employees reporting access to each work practice (Gray & Tudball 2002), and only 6% of organisations have over 80% of employees using the strategies (De Cieri et al 2005). There appears to be a disconnect between the rhetoric of work-life

TABLE 5: CORRELATIONS AND MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR WORK–LIFE BALANCE PREDICTING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

		n	Correlation between work–life balance and engagement ^a	n	Beta
Total sample		16696	0.21	12867	-0.08***
Occupation	Mgr/Prof	3304	0.21	1817	-0.06**
	Non-Mgr/Prof	2568	0.21	1248	-0.04ns
Gender	Male	5993	0.19	4494	-0.08***
	Female	6607	0.21	4906	-0.07***
Age	< 30	4890	0.15	3314	-0.08***
	30-49	3631	0.29	2476	-0.05**
	50+	881	0.26	609	0.03ns
Employment type	Full-time permanent and contract/fixed term	4169	0.27	3965	-0.05***
	Part-time permanent and casual	2286	0.17	2117	-0.10***
Family status	Single with no dependent children	6057	0.16	4562	-0.09***
	Single with dependent children	720	0.28	538	-0.02ns
	Married or de facto with no dependent children	2256	0.25	1721	-0.06**
	Married or de facto with dependent children	3202	0.31	2284	0.00ns

^a All correlations were significant at the $P < 0.001$ level

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$

balance (with its associated organisational policies) and the empirical evidence on the importance of work–life balance to employees and their uptake of such strategies. Across a broad range of individuals and organisations, this study asked whether employees really are dissatisfied with their current work–life balance and how important it is for engaging and retaining employees. We also examined the relationship between work–life balance and other work practices in order to clarify the place of work–life balance strategies within organisations.

Satisfaction with work–life balance

Contrary to the dire situation reported by others (eg Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg 1998), employ-

ees are in general quite happy with their work–life balance and instead rate other aspects of their work environment as less than ideal. Our results suggest that most organisations are providing an environment that supports satisfactory work–life balance. Of the 28 management practices rated, work–life balance came in as the fifth highest performing climate factor. That is, 73% of employees either agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to meet both their non-work and work responsibilities and have a good balance between their work and other aspects of their lives. In contrast, less than half of employees were satisfied with the organisation's ability to provide career opportunities, to consult with and involve employees in decisions that affected them, or to

TABLE 6: CORRELATIONS AND MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE VARIABLES PREDICTING WORK–LIFE BALANCE

	Correlation with work–life balance	Beta
Wellness	0.52	0.43***
Flexibility ^a	0.43	0.25***
Teamwork	0.34	0.10***
Resources	0.31	0.06***
Role clarity	0.30	0.07***
Diversity	0.28	0.04***
Organisation objectives	0.28	0.04***
Talent	0.28	0.00ns
Customer satisfaction	0.28	0.03**
Rewards and recognition	0.27	0.06***
Processes	0.27	0.01ns
Supervision	0.27	0.03**
Motivation and initiative	0.27	0.03*
Job satisfaction	0.27	0.03**
Safety	0.26	0.05***
Change and innovation	0.25	0.01ns
Ethics	0.24	0.01ns
Mission and values	0.23	0.02ns
Technology	0.23	0.00ns
Recruitment	0.22	-0.03*
Leadership	0.22	-0.03*
Learning and development	0.21	-0.03**
Organisation commitment	0.21	-0.08***
Results focus	0.21	-0.01ns
Performance appraisal	0.21	-0.03**
Facilities	0.20	-0.01ns
Cross-unit cooperation	0.19	-0.03**
Involvement	0.17	-0.03**
Organisation direction	0.16	-0.03**
Career opportunities	0.15	-0.03**
Intent to stay	0.09	-0.07***

Note: $R^2 = 0.34$, $P < 0.001$, $n = 12851$ (excluding flexibility)

^a Data on flexibility was only collected in 2006. We repeated the analysis with only the 2006 data, which showed a virtually identical pattern of results to the overall sample. Results for flexibility are from this second analysis ($n = 3334$, $R^2 = 0.35$, $P < 0.001$).

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$, ns = not significant

share information and knowledge between sections in the organisation. These results are fairly consistent with other empirical data showing that in Australia, almost two-thirds of employees are

satisfied with the number of hours they currently work (Thornthwaite 2004). The contrast partially reflects the presentation of work–life balance data from either glass half-empty versus half-full perspectives (or rather one-quarter empty and three-quarters full).

Despite some observations that there appear to be growing numbers of employees who are dissatisfied (linked with desire for more family time, Thornthwaite 2004), we did not see any increase in dissatisfaction with work–life balance between the years 2002 and 2006, although this may be too small an interval to assess such trends. Similarly, our results showed very small differences in work–life balance for age, gender and family structure, with individual variables accounting for only a small proportion of variance in work–life balance (also demonstrated by Frone et al 1992; Greenhaus et al 1997). Work–life balance was no more important for engaging women than men. Women enjoyed a slightly higher work–life balance due to their greater likelihood of part-time or casual employment, which has previously been identified as the ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to creating a more family-friendly work place (Saltzstein et al 2001). This is also consistent with research showing that greater involvement with family (as opposed to work) is related to higher quality of life (Greenhaus et al 2003). Although not as exciting as the current debate about generational differences, our data also shows the unsurprising finding that satisfaction with work–life balance is harder to achieve and more important for middle-aged employees with children (especially single parents) and less important for engaging single employees and under 30s (generation ‘Y’). Again, these results are consistent with those of other researchers (eg Dex & Bond 2005).

One interesting finding regarding individual predictors of work–life balance was that although salary was negatively correlated with work–life balance overall, when other variables were controlled, particularly the numbers of hours worked, those on higher salaries enjoyed slightly

higher work–life balance. This is consistent with suggestions that those employees in higher socioeconomic brackets can afford more help with their non-work responsibilities through resources such as childcare and household help (Allen et al 2000). However, because we measured satisfaction with work–life balance rather than objective work–life balance, the results might also be attributed to social-exchange theory. Employees receiving higher incomes may also be more satisfied with a lower objective level of work–life balance. Our finding that satisfaction with work–life balance was positively related to satisfaction with rewards and recognition also supports this interpretation of results.

In keeping with previous findings, the greater the number of hours worked each week, the lower the level of work–life balance (Dex & Bond 2005; Sturges & Guest 2004; White, et al 2003). Along with the previous researchers, we treated hours worked as an individual variable affected by factors such as full-time versus part-time status. However, the number of hours employees work was also strongly affected by the organisation they worked for. This provides support for the idea that an organisation may be characterised by its ‘long hours’ culture.

Overall, the results for hours worked, together with the small impact of individual variables on work–life balance suggest that work–life balance can not be treated as an issue only for certain demographic sections of the workforce and strategies focussing on individual needs will have limited success. Instead, policies to improve work–life balance need to be targeted at the broader organisational level.

Is work–life balance the key to engagement and retention?

Consistent with previous research, we found a small positive correlation between work–life balance and employee engagement and each of its components: job satisfaction, organisational commitment and intention to stay (Allen et al 2000; Kossek & Ozeki 1998). However, the bigger pic-

ture tells us something much more important, that is, of the 28 organisational climate factors we included in this study, work–life balance was least related to employee engagement and intention to stay with an organisation. By comparison, aspects of the organisation such as effective change management and belief in the mission and values of the organisation were strongly correlated with engagement.

When controlling all these other aspects of the organisational climate, employees with higher work–life balance actually reported lower engagement, particularly demonstrating less commitment to their organisations and less intention to stay. These results do not support the contention by Allen et al (2000) that a lack of balance between work and life may cause employees to flee the situation and seek alternative employment in organisations with more supportive work cultures. Our interpretation of these results is that rather than work–life balance promoting engagement and retention, highly engaged employees will sometimes sacrifice work–life balance to achieve organisational goals, especially if the organisation provides a supportive environment in other ways. Our research is consistent with the study highly effective workplaces by Bond et al (2004). While these workplaces were outstanding in terms of their impact on job satisfaction, job engagement/commitment and retention, nearly half of employees in these organisations were still only rated in the middle in terms of mental health. Bond et al attributed these results to stress. That is, work practices that are effective at engaging and retaining employees are not necessarily the same as those that optimise employee wellness (see also Langford, Parkes & Abbey 2006).

Aspects of organisational climate related to work–life balance

Several aspects of organisational climate were significantly related to work–life balance as hypothesised. These included the management of workloads to reduce stress, providing flexible

work arrangements, supportive supervisors and co-workers, support for diversity and a priority placed on a safety within the workplace. In contrast to work–life balance, wellness was a direct predictor of employee engagement and analyses suggested that any positive association between work–life balance and engagement was mediated by wellness. One limitation of our present research is the cross-sectional nature of our data. While poor work–life balance might be tolerable in the passion and excitement of work now, longitudinal studies may indicate if it leads to burnout and a drop in engagement later down the track. Thus the sustainability poor work–life balance is questionable in the long-term.

It is interesting that contrary to our hypothesis, a focus on achieving results for the organisation was not significantly related to work–life balance. However, managerial and human resource practices promoting individual power and progress did predict lower work–life balance: performance appraisal, career opportunities and involvement in decision-making. These findings are important for understanding how to implement the five ‘healthy workplace practices’ recommended to businesses by Grawitch et al (2006). In addition to work–life balance, these include employee involvement and employee development (incorporating career development). Our results show that these practices can actually be in conflict with each other, and a ‘configurational’ approach to interrelationships between these work practices is required (Delery & Doty 1996). According to this approach, all practices must be considered together and be consistent with one another. Employee development and involvement can take various forms, some of which will be more consistent with other practices (eg work–life balance) and thus more effective in promoting healthy organisations.

For example, organisations can encourage the perception that working long hours are necessary in order to progress within the organisation (Sturges & Guest 2004) and many employees believe that they are less likely to get ahead in

their careers if they use flexible workplace arrangements (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky & Prottas 2003). Moreover, while flexibility of work hours is strongly advocated as beneficial for achieving work–life balance (Bond et al 2004; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman 2001), some employees can actually use their discretion to spend more time working (White, et al 2003). Thus, it seems that organisations can create a ‘high commitment’ rather than ‘high performance’ culture in which career-involved professionals are willing to accept the work demands and sacrifice family life for the prestige and economic rewards that come with their career (for example, in accounting, Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Collins 2001). If organisations can create an equitable system of career development and opportunities to participate in decision-making regardless of the hours people work, we believe there will be less pressure for employees who want good work–life balance but don’t want to sacrifice these things.

What we did not measure

Non-work outcomes

We acknowledge that this study followed an individualistic and economic perspective by measuring employee satisfaction with work–life balance and its impact on organisational goals of employee engagement and retention, rather than considering the wider impact of actual work–life balance. For example, data provided by managers’ partners (Russell 2002) can show a very different picture of satisfaction with relationship quality and family life. Powerful evidence exists that long working hours have negative consequences for couple relationships, children, and communities (Pocock 2000; Voydanoff 2001).

There is still a narrow, although increasingly questioned, view that all business practices must be evaluated solely by their impact on economic bottom-line. Our results suggest that proponents of work–life balance should cease pursuing the ‘business case’, and instead persuade organisa-

tions to consider personal and societal needs. To the extent that employees and their families are key stakeholders of corporations, work–life balance may be considered a key performance indicator of ethical corporate behaviour. Although there was only a small relationship between ethics and work–life balance in the present study, we recommend that work–life balance be understood in terms of constructing and managing work in a socially sustainable way (Lewis et al 2007).

Attraction and recruitment

While we failed to find a relationship between work–life balance and intention to stay, we did not examine the impact of work–life balance on recruitment. It is clear that although employees may have difficulty prioritising work–life balance, they still perceive it as a desirable goal (Sturges & Guest 2004). Honeycutt and Rosen (1997) found organisations were perceived as particularly attractive places to work if they offered flexible career paths and policies. It is possible that organisations may be able to successfully market themselves as ‘employers of choice’ by offering cultures supportive of work–life balance.

An alternative: Work–life alignment

Most work–life balance research has been in the context of work–family conflict and theoretically positioned work in opposition to family (Eby et al 2005). The term ‘work–life balance’ itself implies an exclusivity and inherent conflict between work and other life domains. Yet any conflict between work and other aspects of life is not solely dependent on objective time allocation, but includes a person’s identification with each role and the extent to which time spent in each is role affirming (Edwards & Rothbard 1999; Thompson & Bunderson 2001). As such, Bruck, et al (2002) found that conflict as a result of time or stress were not significantly related to job satisfaction, but only ‘behaviour’ based conflict, when behaviour that is effective and necessary at work would be counterproductive elsewhere. Such behaviour is conceivably the out-

working of values and beliefs, and is consistent with our result that an employee’s alignment with the values and purpose of their organisation is strongly related to satisfaction and engagement. While not denigrating the weighty social implications of the work–life balance issues, the results of the present study suggest there is room for a more positive integration of work and life to allow the cross-pollination of values, passions, interests and abilities.

Together these results suggest that work–life balance policies are understood best in relation to other work practices and should prompt organisations to implement broader organisational strategies. Creating work–life alignment through congruent goals and values, fostering corporate social responsibility, looking after the health and safety of employees, improving reward and performance appraisal systems to more accurately reflect performance outcomes (rather than time in the office), developing fair and supportive supervisors, and facilitating participation and involvement in decision-making among all employees, would increase employee engagement and retention generally, reduce the impact of diversity and flow on to greater satisfaction with work–life balance.

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Received 7 November 2006

Accepted 17 September 2007

SPECIAL ISSUES ON URBAN AND RURAL RENEWAL

Sea Changes, Tree Changes and Bush Lessons: Post-compulsory Education and Rural Renewal

A special issue of *Rural Society* journal Vol 19(3) December 2009

Guest edited by **Geoff Danaher** and **Roberta Harreveld**, Central Queensland University, and **Patrick Danaher**, University of Southern Queensland

Over the past 20 years, reforms to Australia's post-compulsory educational systems have attempted to provide greater opportunities for communities in regional, coastal and rural Australia, delivering wider access to universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), including Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). At the same time, these communities have been undergoing significant transformation.

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