

The end of the Work- Life Balance era? Expatriates perspective

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Abstract— Having a balanced life seems to be of a particular complexity and rather hard to achieve for all business people, in particular it has been considered difficult to reach for expatriates. This study describes how female and male expatriates approach work- life balance (WLB) issues and why, as well as where they see the key success factors on their international assignments. The data were obtained from 20 in depth interviews conducted on Singapore- and Dubai- based expats, age 23-54 across 13 nations. The research reveals that the approach to WLB changes with age, position and can be even industry as well as gender specific. Hence, female interviewees in an overwhelming majority disapprove of the WLB concept, while male expats value this equilibrium highly, although they appear to have a different perception of it. That attitude itself has a significant impact on work- life conflicts and job satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the findings indicate that female expats value cultural intuition and making friends locally at the same level as professionalism, whereas the male counterparts identified fast adaptability, tolerance for ambiguity and openness to change as the most important to their success. Next, expatriates working for banks or consulting firms have fully different attitudes and expectations when it comes to WLB, compared to the colleagues performing governmental or hospitality jobs. Lastly, from my interviews it can be concluded that the more experienced the expatriate is the more value in WLB they see, sometimes because of regrets and burnout, but also because of the high social status reached and feeling of accomplishment. This paper aims to expand the knowledge of expatriates and their attitudes in the globalized market place.

Keywords—*expatriates, gender differences, work-life balance*

I. Introduction

Today's global market place has created a very complex, challenging and dynamic environment, where long- term, sustainable work organization and career planning are practically non-existent. WLB or other words the harmony between work and non- work life is believed to increase efficacy, effectiveness, productivity, happiness and job performance (Kumar & Chekraborty, 2013; Yasbek, 2004; Kollinger-Santer & Fischlmayr, 2013) and has always been on the top of the agenda for public and private institutions around the world. The concept of WLB was already developed in the 1990s, however it is still rather unclear how to define it operationally. There are many factors influencing this situation.

Firstly, the tough and intensifying labour market situation somewhat shapes the trend- people tend to put work first and chase better job opportunities across the globe. That leads to the second reason, which is unequal talent distribution and the struggle of companies to retain talent. Schuler (2009) states that due to home market talent shortages, expatriates are sent to fill them in, especially in emerging or young economies. Further, according to Anxo (2012), beliefs and attitudes of employees versus their work has changed dramatically. Thirdly, traditional roles performed by men and women have shifted together with household- and demographic changes. Female participation in the labour market is more significant than it has ever been. Finally, the line between time spent at work and time at home disappeared because of the technology and virtual commuting. So where is the balance currently? Is it so hard that expats chose to focus on the 'work part' of the equation? What are the key success factors to expatriation and do they involve WLB? Those questions will be addressed in this article from expatriates' point of view.

II. Literature review

A. Work-Life Balance

WLB is regarded as very complex and rather hard to implement because of company practices but also employees interest (Todd & Binns, 2013). The conventional aspects of WLB focus around age, gender and 'assigned' responsibilities towards family or partner's situation (Gregory, Milner & Windebank, 2013). Men and women have different perceptions of WLB and their on job performance also differs (Bhatti, Kaliani Sundram et al. 2012). Therefore, multinational Corporations are unwillingly sending women candidates on international assignments. The researchers seek the reason in home culture expectations for women to perform traditionally assigned roles of mother, wife and homemaker (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006). Some women are neglecting the need for getting married and having children and defy work- family balance concept, they propose work- personal dimension instead (Ensher et al. 2002). The research shows that host country nationals see no difference in gender or marital status when it comes to expatriates job performance (Selmer and Lauring, 2011).

The family is believed to be the main factor affecting expatriates, and often work- family conflict (WFC) has a negative impact on expatriates' performance (Shih, Chiang et al. 2010). Married expatriates focus on family because expatriate job affects the whole family, whereas single SIE's seek life change and adventure. Seniority and previous experiences influence the general perceptions and attitudes significantly (Selmer and Lauring, 2011). Not to forget is parenthood and how children affect work by temporary- but also definitive disappearance from the labour market or

reduction of working time (Anxo et al., 2012). The authors further stress that males are working generally longer hours, especially when having children.

Anderson et al. (2012) checked that when people work more than 40 hours a week they are too tired and preoccupied to have energy devoted to family matters. A supporting voice comes from Anxo (2012), whose research reveals that males are less satisfied with WLB because they work extremely long hours. However with the increased mobility and labour flexibility offered by “virtual office” and telework work time is extended. It is perceived as increasing productivity and prolonging working long hours. At the same time it hinders teamwork (Hill, Miller, et al. 1998). On one side some authors argue that it enables an employee to spend more time at home (Jones, 1997), other authors think “Giving a workaholic an electronic briefcase may in some ways be like giving an alcoholic a bottle of gin” (Hill, 1995). The overall environments’ approval of economic- and financial outcomes superiority over advantages from social engagement is what support imbalance between work and private life.

Due to post-financial crisis repercussions public policies also had to cut back the welfare arrangements at the same time the costs of having a family are increasing and sometimes it is simply an economical choice (Gregory et al. 2013). In the majority of cases the level of WLB is very limited not to disrupt work as it collides with business- and operational goals (Todd & Binns, 2013). Moreover, the authors found that most employees feel uncomfortable using the WLB policies.

B. Expatriates

There are many definitions of expatriates and expatriation, depending on the context. For the purpose of this article I adopt the following: “Expatriates are noncitizens of the countries in which they are working” (Dessler, 2011). Duppada and Aryasri (2010) suggest that expatriates foster global competence and integrate the company on the global scale. Many authors (Duppada and Aryasri 2010; Black and Gregersen 1999; Templer 2010) support this point of view: “Expatriation refers to foreign job assignment for a certain period of time. Expatriates play an important role in the business operation, and are an expensive human resource” (Wang 2008). Organizations face a challenge to attract, but also develop and keep ‘talent’ (Schuler, 2009) but only that gives them competitive advantage globally (Bhatti, Kaliani Sundram et al. 2012). The need for open- minded, challenge-ready and flexible workforce is global. The nature of careers is however changing towards less committed and more self-initiated choice of oversease assignments (Collings et al. 2009, Wang, 2008). The motives for expatriation have a direct impact on job satisfaction, speed of adjustment and effectiveness (Shay & Baack, 2004).

Managing offshore business activities however requires good fit for this particular job type (Ko and Yang 2011) and expatriate’s role is the one of strategic importance “Ability to manage global assignments effectively is critical to competing internationally” (Templer 2010). Their crucial role is recognized by OSCE raport, where the authors make clear that skills, efforts, knowledge, initiative and creativity of

expatriates is of inestimable value for the host country (Baruah, Cholewinski et al. 2006). However travel, long working hours and new a job setting are seen as disrupting personal life and causing stress, especially for female expatriates (Mäkelä et al, 2011). Also family tensions and social setting are very often named as the biggest barriers to success along with a feeling of isolation, detachment from the headquarters and hindered information flow (Daily et al. 2000). Apparently expatriates often suffer from homesickness (Hack-Polay, 2012), which can be reduced by an accompanying loved on. Nevertheless, it is also clear that a spouse has great impact on the expats’ willingness to relocate and later on the adjustment, which can be both- positive and negative, depending on firms’ support programs (Konopaske et al. 2005).

Expatriates are perceived as skilled and knowledgeable human capital, with exceptional skills and personality characteristics that enables them to work across the globe to meet a firm’s strategic goals. WLB in this context seems to be a matter of multi- tasking real life just the same way as work life is being managed (Ensher et al. 2002).

III. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper semi structured, in depth interviews were conducted among 20 expatriates with the experience on posting from 6-11 years as shown in Table 1. Data collection method was chosen to extract the informants’ knowledge and pay attention to their stories (Kvale, 2007). The interviewees represented the following countries: Germany, Poland, USA, India, Kazakhstan, UK, Jordan, Kuwait, Switzerland, Spain, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. They took from 30 minutes to more than one hour, were transcribed and analysed carefully. To ensure the widest variety the informants’ background the following industries were included: banking, hospitality, entertainment, IT, oil and gas, automotive, healthcare, consulting and government-related institutions in middle- and top management positions.

TABLE I. INTERVIEWEES PROFILE

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Total respondents number	12	8
Mean age	37.16	32
Single	5	6
Married	7	2
Level within organization		
Top management	7	4
Middle management	5	4
Average years on posting	11.16	6.375
Education background		
Bachelor	3	1
Master	2	5
MBA	7	2

As presented above, the mean age for interviewed males was 37.16, females on average 32. Also the experience in posting differs a lot, since males in the interviewed group seem to have almost twice more years on posting than their female counterparts. When it comes to education levels both females and males have university degrees, mostly in management or business administration, however much more males with just a bachelor degree seem to achieve satisfactory job offers. However, it is still rare to see as many women as men on top managerial positions, especially in Dubai.

IV. Results

This article aims at understanding how expatriates, deal with balancing their work life with personal interests and commitments. From the interviews it is quite clear that the represented group of highly skilled individuals has a somewhat different concept of Work- Life Balance from the theories presented in the literature review. Therefore, in this part of the article, I would like to highlight the most important outcomes of the research in two main parts: work- life balance fresh perspective that interviewed expatriates introduced and the success factors they perceive as important.

A. *WLB definition and attitudes*

When asked to describe what WLB means to the interviewed group of expatriates words like “old- fashioned”, “sacrificed” and “complex” appeared surprisingly often. The interviewees claim that when deciding to expatriate they make a conscious choice and their surrounding has to agree to that as well. The WLB definition that was created by expats focused on the family responsibilities dominantly. By family they meant parents back home, children, spouse/ partner but also friends back home. The reason why WLB might seem less important is that most of the informants call the life stage they are currently in “transitional” or “explorational”. That can suggest that they are not yet at the stage when they realize the importance and benefits of life outside work and it is a temporary situation. Most of those career- focused individuals even claim they would not achieve that much if their private lives would be complicated.

With this attitude it is very important to understand the lifestyle of the interviewees, which they perceive generally as easy and privileged. Without an exception expats based in Singapore and Dubai stressed how easy it is to live in those cities compared to their home. Not only do they feel specially treated and looked up to, but they don't have to take care of all the housework because they have helpers who are doing it for them. That takes off their shoulders the ‘homemaking’, especially for single expatriates. What they call ‘cool’ status also involves activities such as: daily eating out, meeting in expat clubs, networking events and other social gatherings. Both Singapore and Dubai are very vibrant cities, offering a lot to expats in terms of luxury treatment such as private drivers or living in serviced apartments.

On the other hand the group of married expatriates stress how hard it is to devote enough time and attention to their partners and friends. Fitting in their partner's working schedules and spending value time together requires

significant amounts of planning. Expatriates with children are particularly concerned with their well-being, but all of them stress that they are giving their children a better life and education by organizing time for children to keep them busy with study or develop interest while they work. In both cities children are taken care of by professional nannies and private tutors, attend international schools of the highest level, develop local language skills, extracurricular interests and ‘global citizen’ identity.

More than seeking WLB interviewed expats seek to change habits, whereby they can accomplish all the set career goals in the shortest time possible. To do that, they seem to develop rituals that they practice daily. All informants stressed that the way they start off the day and how they plan their time is completely different from their usual home routine. Almost all expats that I talked with declare that they are happier, healthier, slimmer and more self- confident. Especially male expats think that squeezing in the gym session, a morning swim or late afternoon jog is crucial to their day routine. Due to the fact that overall male expats declare to work longer hours they value their hobbies a lot. They prefer active forms of business meetings, very popular are sports such as golf, squash or tennis. Also they try to share hobbies with partners since it not only is a form of spending time together, but also a matter of keeping their spouse active professionally (which increases the household's economic situation). The factors that can contribute to new habits development are i.e. an improved financial situation, gaining distance from family issues or a willingness to keep up with the new environment.

Expatriates seem to be more concerned about stress management than managing work- life balance. As they share in the interviews some industries are more WLB supportive than others. Therefore the choice of the posting is the key-sometimes finding a job that corresponds to the private life needs of an expats solves the problem. In industries such as banking, consulting and IT, where high rewards are at stake and constant work under pressure involved, the private life balance (or social sphere) very work- environment dependent. On the contrary governmental institutions, hospitality and entertainment are treated by expats as more balance-supportive. Working extensively is a conscious choice either to advance the career quickly (expats stress that abroad it is much easier than on the home market), to put away some money or to escape from personal issues. Expatriates although treated as mentors, are also expected to be ready to deal with conflicts, lead international projects effectively or submerge in the local culture smoothly. Some of them are however aware that the local employees feel discriminated in terms of financial rewards, mistreated or afflicted with the fact that they were not given the equal chances to apply for the position. Consequently, coping with high demands and meeting locals' expectations are the most common stressors, which in some cases lead to addictions and burnout. Therefore from the interviews with more experienced expats it was clear that they have some regrets concerning their full devotion to work. After experiencing stress breakdowns and heart diseases they now know how important the component of private life is.

The perspective on balance that expatriates are after seems to have a broader dimension in terms of: physical wellbeing,

health, keeping up hobbies, intellectual challenges, social commuting, professional networking, spiritual and emotional dimensions. On the top of those factors of material-, professional- and financial stability were listed as important to achieve harmony, satisfaction and self- actualization. Social status and being regarded a mentor, person of trust or firms' leaders are named by expats as the ultimate offset and reward. Many of the interviewees claim that they feel the place they are in now challenges them to go the extra mile and reflects their real personality. Also the feeling of serving or giving back to the society they work in was brought up in the majority of interviews. The knowledge sharing, the ability to support, help and guide younger local colleagues makes expats chose the work side of the balance because they feel needed. It appears that the work satisfaction sources can be also in the job itself, not in the real life outside of work.

In summary, expatriates know what to expect by taking the posting. They also know that this period in their life is only a temporary one (or at least that were the initial plans). All of the expatriates interviewed were very focused business professionals, however they are aware that WLB, in any meaning, can not be taken for granted and requires working on it constantly. Different people approach the balance in different ways, not all interviewees had children to take care of or were in relationships at the time of the interviews.

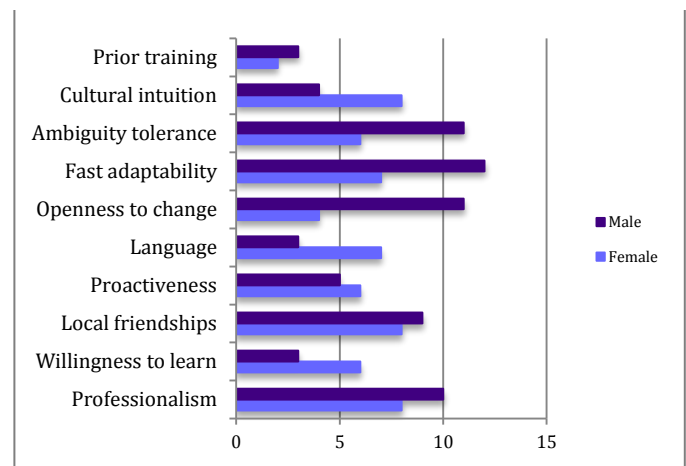
B. Key success factors on the posting

The overall posting experience is strongly dependent on the social aspects, proximity of home- and host cultures, the industry expats work for and intensity of the work. Touching upon the social sphere it is hard not to mention that most expatriates have been trying to establish good relations with their local coworkers. That however seems to be difficult because as most interviewees point out they are neither invited to join locals during the lunchtime, nor to get- togethers after work. On the positive note working time organization seems to be more flexible for the interviewed expats compared to their pre- expatriation experiences. Here, time management and scheduling came as the most important to achieve a happy working day, interrupted by gym sessions, golf or dinner networking. That is how expats declare they make the most out of their work, while staying healthy and fit.

For all the interviewees one thing seemed to be of the utmost importance- to remain the “craftsman”. That is the reason foreigners can easily find a good job offer away from home but that is also satisfying their own ambitions. The desire to be the top professional in their own field is greater for males because, as they say, they enjoy having the authority among the local employees and that position- building is their main drive. For females it is more the necessity, especially while working in male- dominated cultures to be able to break through the ‘old boys network’. Luck was identified as second, integral part of success on posting. That may sound trivial but most of expatriate missions end up prematurely, which leads to costs and projects failure. Therefore, fortune in terms of finding the right job fit, team fit, meeting right people, good timing and adjusting to the culture generally is in expats’ eyes essential. That is achieved by creating platforms for communication, network- and support groups.

Also all the expats stress the crucial importance of learning by observing locals. That is the cultural exchange process and adjustment enhancer. Expats usually tend to stay in their hermetic communities, which give them home-away-from-home comfort. However, the interviewed group highlights the importance of engaging socially with locals and follow their routines, networking patterns or even eating habits. That is to show that as an expat one is really open and interested in the culture and respects it entirely. To do that respondents do not consider that getting rid of their own habits is necessary. Quite the contrary- they think sharing some home customs might change the perception of an expat to be more open, interesting and eager to share. Above all those nuances, Figure 1 depicts the top characteristics that expatriates listed basing on own experiences. It shows the differences in perceptions between female and male expatriates’ as to traits needed to succeed.

Figure 1. List of important personal traits that help expats



From the above figure it can be seen that the least important from the expats point of view turned out to be language and prior training. Trying to learn the local language was not considered necessary, because in both- Singapore and Dubai the business language is English. In terms of pre-departure training the interviewed group either underestimated the importance of it or really believe that it was useless. Expats suggested that the only valuable lessons can be given not by HR but by expats, who actually returned from their mission, who can share first hand experiences.

All female interviewees stressed professionalism, cultural intuition and having local friends as helpful in achieving the success on their postings. An interesting aspect of this this part of the interviews was that ladies provided an explanation on how personal traits are strongly related with achieving harmony. As an example: the social dimension can be satisfied with proactiveness in building own network, developing language skills to showing respect for the culture whereby cultural intuition is developed. Professional dimension can be enhanced through tolerance to ambiguity in a new work environment and fast adaptability. All female informants strongly denied the classical WLB model, which they think puts them to certain roles and builds a glass ceiling above their heads. They stressed that expatriation was a method of

escaping those cliches and achieving career objectives. Males, on the other hand, cultivate fast adaptability as according to them it express their professionalism and rich expatriate experience. Openness to change relates to exploring new habits and building tolerance for ambiguity in the new setting.

The key to success was above all related to the attitude itself. The approach of females who are ready to chase career goals and males who wish to have more time to spend with children or take care of own health are breaking down the stereotypes and shifting the WLB meaning to one that is more relevant for expatriates in contemporary world. Self- fulfilling prophecy as the interviewed expats name it is simply the readiness to accept the trade- off and knowledge of own industry specifics. Hence, some industries are known to be more stress- generating and ‘absorbing’ than others.

v. Conclusion

WLB originally associated with: parental leave, childcare leave, welfare- and family benefits, in the 24/7 economic reality shifted towards: time management for work efficiency. For expatriates it is not about “balance” or “harmony” but about incorporating personal sphere and interests in an intense working schedule and own ambitions. Fortunately expatriates are in an overwhelming majority open minded professionals with high cultural intelligence skills and in build flexibility to adjust to any setting. However, they should be aware of the fact that levels of stress with which they can cope at home may require extra effort in another setting, which alters the balance. Exposed to additional stressors such as cultural shock, being left out and in some extreme cases being even rejected or treated as a threat- might really affect their well being. The so- called ‘rituals’ and flexibility in managing work schedule saves the day for the respondents. Clearly more research is needed to explore the WLB on foreign assignments to make general conclusions. Nonetheless, this article provides a good starting point for future researchers.

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