

The Rhetoric and Reality of Alternative Work Arrangements (AWA) in Malaysia

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Abstract—*In work-life balance debate, scholars and practitioners underpinned work-related stress as the main problem in their field of concern. However, the introduction of Alternative Work Arrangements (AWA) in the 1970s has shed a light on the difficulty of successfully juggling work and family realms. It allows employees to engross on multiple roles in today's demanding work environment. This article reviews a range of work-family literature to identify the gap between rhetoric and reality of AWA execution. It emphasizes on flexihour and telecommuting implementation, which are still at a preliminary stage in Malaysia. Through this article, opinion and suggestions will be discussed to enhance the effectiveness of alternative work arrangements in Malaysia. This article suggests more thorough research is needed to determine the applicability of alternative work arrangements in improving public and private sector efficiency.*

Alternative work arrangements (AWA); flexitime; telecommuting; work-life balance; Malaysia

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid technological changes, the impact of globalization, the importance of knowledge management and collaboration across boundaries totally altered an eight-to-five work environment (Bateman and Snell, 2009; Smith, 2000). The need to consult with colleagues and customers eight or ten times zone away means employees of global firms are “on calls” 24 hours a day (Robbins and Judge, 2011). A clear defined line between work and non-work sphere no longer exist which will lead to more strain and personal conflict to an affected person.

Loconcz and Bortolotto (2009) identified long working hour (more than 46 hours per week) and overworked as the major contributor to dissatisfaction towards work-family relationship among working Australian women. Regardless of the differences in family structure, status, rank, position and

field of specialization, there is a common desire of the working population to reduce the separation between family and work. They also desire for the possibility to achieve a better balance between working life, family obligations, leisure and socializing. Such desires have paved the way for organizations to redesign and offer a more family-friendly work options. Employees are seeking for organization that can provide assistance for work and family issues reconciliation (Robbin and Judge, 2011; Burke, *et. al.*, 2006; Hammer *et. al.*, 2005; Hopkins and O'neil, 2007; Mc Dermitt, *et. al.*, 2000). Organizations and researchers introduced alternative work arrangement in 1970's as a remedy for disproportion of work and family time allocation. Nowadays, flexible policies such as flexitime, telecommuting, job sharing and compressed workweek are accessible and utilized widely by various organization (Robbins and Judge, 2011; Dessler, 2008; Bateman and Snell, 2009; Kossek and Lee, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to argue the possibility of flexible working hour and telecommuting in assisting employees to reconcile work and family realms. It will also discuss the gap between rhetoric and reality of alternative work arrangement (AWA) implementation in Malaysia.

II. WORK-LIFE BALANCE : A NEVER ENDING STRUGGLE

Balance is the ability to manage work and life responsibilities that result in a satisfying and productive work and family life (Thompson and Beauvais, 2000). Greenbalt (2002) described work-life balance as the absence of unacceptable conflict between work and non-work demands. Early work-family researches often associated work-life balance with work-family conflict. The competition between work and personal domain for individual's limited resources (time and energy) was identified as the main cause of work-

family interference. Conflicting demands from different domain create time, physical and psychological strain on individual life. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), classified work-family conflict into three (3) categories: time-based; strain-based; and behavior-based conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when time demands of one role make it difficult or impossible to fully participate in another role; while strain-based conflict happen when symptoms of psychological strain generate by demands of the work and family role intrude into another roles (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Thompson and Beauvais, 2000). They also claimed when in-role behavior is incompatible with expected behavior in another role; it will emanate behavioral-based conflict in an individual's life.

Evidence from the previous studies indicated work-family conflicts were instigated by work demands, family responsibilities and individual characteristics (Byron, 2005). The number of hours worked per week (Byron, 2005; Grotto and Lyness, 2010); inflexible working schedule (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Mennino et al, 2005); inhospitable organizational culture (Premaux et al, 2007); and lack of management support (Cohen and Single, 2001) are the most common factors that contribute to work-family conflict. While family-domain factor such as number of children (Voydanoff, 2005; Pichler, 2009); marital status (Hill et al, 2004); parental demands (Parasuraman and Simmers, 2001); and spousal employment (Keene and Quadagno, 2004) emanate the family-to-work interference. Previous researchers claimed work-related domain was far more influential in employees' struggle successfully juggling their work and personal lives (Byron, 2005; Eby, et al, 2005). Work-family conflict affects work morale; mental and physical health (Muna and Mansour, 2009); reduce job satisfaction (Woodward, 2007); and decrease organizational commitment and performance. However, the effects vary depends on occupation, position, age, life experience and individual's career cycle.

Job-related stress, such as role conflict, ambiguity, and overload, seems to be spilling over into employees' lives from work (Byron, 2005). According to Eikhof, Warhust and Haunschild (2007), solutions for a weakening work lies in job redesign and "humanizing" the work place. Job should be redesign based on individual characteristics, current working environment, rapidly changing technology and their household responsibilities. It is crucial for organizations to ensure their employees maintain their level of concentration and job performance. Thompson and Beauvais (2000) listed four type of program that can be offered by the organization to support employees' work-life balance: time-based; information-based; money-based; and direct-based strategy. Time-based strategy such as flexible working schedules and leave programs provide assistance to lessen time pressure. Flexible work hours and compressed workweek will allow employee sets their working schedule to fit their family or personal responsibilities. An extended structured interview conducted by Woodward (2007), identified flexible hours and compressed work week can improve employees' work-life balance. Those who are working in a flexible time arrangement are more satisfied, efficient and demonstrate higher organizational commitment (Robbins and Judge, 2011; Snell and Bohlander, 2010).

According to a nationwide survey in The Republic of Ireland, female employees in Public sector preferred flexi hour compared to telecommuting because of home and work boundaries issue (Russell, *et. al.*, 2009). Flexible hour arrangement lower work-life conflict while telecommuting increase work-life imbalance due to longer working hour and the "always on" technology like mobile phone and home email (Russell *et. al.*, 2009). Alternative work arrangements indicate organizations ability to facilitate employees' work-life balance and considered as a crucial competitive strategy in attracting or retaining high performers. Employee priority is no longer emphasizing solely on career success, they are also concerned about their personal needs, household responsibilities and community affiliation.

III. FLEXIBLE WORKING HOUR

The key elements of flexihour are core hours, bandwidth and agreement between employees and employers. Employees can choose when to start and stop their work-related task at a certain agreed limitation (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Baltes et al, 1999; Scandura and Lankau, 1997); whereas employer obligation is to decide the bandwidth (opening hour), and when employee must present at their work station (core hours) (Maimunah, 2008). Flexihour provide employees with a sense of autonomy by allowing them to decide their preferred working time. However, it does not indicate a total freedom due to the imposed restrictions upon employees who choose to honour the arrangement such as present during core hours, attend meeting and any important occasion organized by the organization.

Atkinson and Hall (2009) stated that flexihour is only beneficial for a certain group of people in the organization. Most employees were reported to be unaffected by such policy. They also identified that certain positions such as senior managers are not suitable for flexihour. This is due to the fact that part of their responsibilities is 'Leadership by example'. The Malaysian work culture e.g. coming in late or leaving early from office, perceived as 'not a good working habit' may emanate negative impression even though they are present during core hours. Besides, flexihour is also perceived as a favour and not an entitlement from the organization to those who experienced difficulty in juggling their work and personal live. Therefore, flexihour often identified as a resource offered to solve women's issue in the organization (Carlson et al, 2008). Gendered perceptions towards flexihour may hinder acceptance across the workforce.

Despite skepticisms in some quarters, debates and controversies surrounding it, flexible working hour is still widely accepted due to demanding household responsibilities. This is not surprising as those who bear more competing demands will experience greater conflict. Thus, it is more likely to benefit from job-resource offered by the organization (Carlson et al, 2008). Flexihour reduce conflict and enhance the interaction between work and family domain by providing time flexibility. It enhances employees' morale by providing autonomy and control over their work which, in turn can be

positively related to job-life performance and satisfaction (Carlson et al, 2008; Maimunah, 2008; Scandura and Lankau, 1997). The implementation of flexihour can elevate employees' motivational level by providing a comfortable, peaceful and less stressful working environment (Ahmad et al, 2013). However, organization may face challenges in coordinating and supervising the participants, monitoring employees' performance and it may possibly change work flow and organizational culture. Flexihour is not a panacea; it has a possibility to create more conflict if employees take on more responsibilities. According to Voydanoff (2004), flexihour are more related to conflict rather than enriching the relationship between work and family sphere (Carlson et al, 2008). Organizations need to prepare a systematic monitoring system to evade unnecessary outcomes, so that flexihour can be effectively managed.

IV. TELECOMMUTING

Defining telecommuting will involve the element of technology, location, contractual agreement and time (Hill, et al., 2003). Telecommuting provides flexibility for employees to work separately from main office with technological assistance such as personal computer, fax machine, phone and information technology (Baltes and Clark, 2009; Maimunah, 2008; Quick and Nelson, 2009). Due to information technology advances, working outside the main office whether a home-based or virtual-based telecommuting are now possible. Fixed working hour is not required but extra efforts are needed to monitor performance and ensure teleworkers are updated with company policies and activities. Telecommuting creates a sense of autonomy and has a positive influence on employee's motivation. An agreement exists between a teleworker and his organization; it is a gesture of kindness and trust, understanding and commitment towards employees and organization well-being (Morganson et al, 2010). By offering telecommuting program, employee will feel valued which will lead to a higher work-life balance and organizational commitment (Greenberg, 2011).

A study by Hill and colleagues (2003) indicated a higher willingness among teleworkers to put extra effort on organizational success compared to those working in the traditional work setting. However, some may experience work-life imbalance due to lack of physical boundary between work and home. Home is no longer a personal space for teleworkers. It may create confusion because of the increased time density and employees' ability to do multiple roles at the same time, which will result more strain between teleworkers' work and home sphere.

V. ALTERNATIVE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN MALAYSIA

In line with the Total Quality Management (TQM) concept with continuous improvement as part of the initiative to uplift the service delivery system of the Civil Service, flexible

working hours schedule was implemented in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur commencing 1st May 1998. The government has agreed that the SWH be extended to all departments and agencies under the Federal Government throughout the country. The key objective of this policy is to improve the service quality and extend the service duration to the public. (Ahmad, et al, 2013). Alternative work arrangements were officially implemented by private sector in 2007 and 2009 in public sector in Malaysia. Shell Malaysia found challenges to get women into higher leadership positions due to responsibility to the family, lack of visible role models and lack of management experience (Mabal Tan and Ahmad-FakhriHamzah, 2009). To address these issues, Shell Malaysia offered flexible work option, compressed work week, opting out and career development program for their female staff in 2007. They believe flexibility in work arrangement is valued by employees who need to juggle their work and personal life.

Informal flexihour for instance is a common practice that represents organizational sensitivity towards employees' career-family demands in Malaysia. It is a mutual agreement between employees and employer to comply with eight-working hour obligation. It has been widely practised by Western organizations. However, flexible hour was formally introduced among academician in 2009 and extended across all public sector agencies in 2010. They are required to work 8 hour a day; clock-in between 7.30 am to 8.30 am; and clock-out between 4.30pm and 5.30 p.m. In private sector, Citibank has implemented flexihour in 2006 to the employees from certain positions and departments. It was well-accepted and conveyed positive feedback from employees especially those with young children. Those who opt for flexihour were reported to experience higher satisfaction; were more loyal to the organization; and willing to put in more effort on their job.

Preliminary study by MIMOS indicated a high acceptance rate towards informal telecommuting among employees in Malaysia. It is well-accepted by employees, unions, corporate and public sector and policy makers (Ng and Jin, 2000). Telecommuting has been formally implemented by Shell in 2007 as an effort to retain their high performers especially women who have the inclination to leave the organization once they have a child. Such decisions will affect organizational pool of talents and efficiency. Hence, working from home provides employees with a sense of balance by working and taking care of their children at the same time. National Development Council has endorsed teleworking as an acceptable mode of work in the country and the concept is supposed to appear in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005)(Ahmad et al, 2013). Whereas, Ministry of Work has conducted a preliminary study to 39 participants which started in January 2010 and ended on 31st March 2010. It had been extended to three months for a second phase with an addition of 20 participants to indicate the effectiveness of the program. The first phase participants showed 85 percent increase in performance while some participants from architecture department experienced 100 percent increase in their performance.

Regardless of the positive outcomes experienced by both, private and public sector, various parties still have doubt on the applicability of telecommuting in Malaysia. One of the major

concerns is the isolation feeling caused by lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues and supervisor. Employees perceived lack of direct interaction and visibility in the office may affect employees' performance evaluation, as well as their career development opportunities. Women and disable employees are worried that telecommuting may create larger gap and increase the existing inequality of treatment when they opt to participate in this program (Ng and Jin, 2000). Because of the mentioned reasons, employees are still reluctant to participate in telecommuting although it is widely offered by organizations. Organizations are more concerned on high cost of installing hardware, software and the telecommunications infrastructure as well as the problems of monitoring and managing teleworkers. Telecommuting needs a proper monitoring system so that employees' work and performance can be closely scrutinized (Thompson and Beauvais, 2000).

VI. DISCUSSION

The declining of trade and investment barrier enables organizations to view the world as a global market instead of just a country as their market. Thus, spur economic growth. Consequently, it creates more job opportunities, raises per capita income and altering a country's work value through the involvement of multinational companies. The involvement of multinational companies will blend the host and home country's culture and assimilate the culture that emphasizes on performance and sustainability in the industry. It makes work-life balance seems unattainable since businesses are conducted across time zones and international boundaries. Completely separating work and home from contaminating each other's domain is less likely and even impossible to happen. Flexihour may not have a relevant impact for those working with multinational organizations due to different working hours. Therefore, organizations are offering other work options to ease the transition process from work to family realms or vice versa. The implementation of formal flexihour in Malaysia brings a shed of light for those who desire better balance in life but it is not practiced across organizations in Malaysia and employees are still forced to alter their family obligation to suit their work demands.

Work-life balance in Malaysia is severe among those who are working in private sector compare to public sector. Having said that, some position in public sector also experience difficulty in juggling work and family responsibilities. Allegations that claimed those who work in public sector experience less work-life conflict compared to those who work in private sector is biased and do not represent the real situation in Malaysia. Indicators such as family demands, work or family conflict, social and organizational support, as well as individual difference contribute to work-life imbalance experience among employees. Therefore, a more thorough research is needed to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of alternative work arrangement such as flexihour and telecommuting in Malaysia. Several researches reported a positive relationship between AWA, employees' motivation level, job satisfaction and performance (Ahmad et al, 2012; Ng et al, 2000). However,

it is far less than sufficient to portray the real situation in Malaysia.

Government and organization are offering flexibility as a remedy to issues pertaining to long working hours. Nevertheless, time and place flexibility do not necessarily lessen individual work-life interference. Providing time flexibility program such as flexihour or telecommuting will not shorten employees' working hour. Flexihour for instance, only grant clock-in and clock-out time flexibility but employees are still required to be in the office for eight (8) hours. The implementation of formal flexihour in Malaysia may bring a shed of light for work and family dilemma. Most private organizations are result-oriented where financial performance is vital for sustainability and survival in the industry. Therefore, those who failed to cope with the fast pace of private organizations may succumb to and be replaced by Malaysia's large capable young talent pool. The growing number of graduates escalates competition for a limited job opportunity in Malaysia. However, the impact of flexihour enactment may differ and may not bring any drastic improvement for those who used to practice it informally on the basis of mutual understanding between supervisor and subordinate. Furthermore, formal flexibility granted in public sector for instance only emphasized on clock-in and clock-out time whereas family responsibilities also exist in the midst of employees' normal working hour.

It is important for organizations in Malaysia to offer more alternative work options to accommodate employee's need and current work environment. Providing various alternative work options may help retain high performers and the sustainability of the organization. However, offering AWAs require trust from the organization on the competency and integrity of those who are involved in these work arrangement. Thus, organization need to provide relevant training since the implementations of AWAs require new skills, change in work culture, restructuring the organization, and the most important element is trust. Providing training and installing ICT for instance, may ease communication barrier due to lack of face-to-face interaction and might reduce isolation feeling among teleworkers. Employees are also responsible to cooperate and support the organization to ensure that the implementation of AWAs would achieve its purposes.

Policy makers are also well-aware of the importance of work-life balance issues in Malaysia. There is no denial on various initiatives by the government and policy makers in assisting Malaysian workforce to reconcile their work and family responsibilities but it is way behind what has been practiced in the Western countries. The implementation of formal flexihour and telecommuting and other family-friendly benefits that had been offered to comply with Employment Act 1955 are part of the initiative to instill better work-life balance. Regular assessment and reviewing legislative framework are required for continuous improvement and to address current needs of Malaysian workforce. It is also crucial to consider compressed work week and formal job sharing as part of the options to fulfill needs of Malaysians diversified workforce.

VII. CONCLUSION

There is still a lack of research investigating the impact of AWA to work-life balance in Malaysia. It should be studied thoroughly before the implementation can be extended to every department in the public and private sector. Organization may appear employee-friendly by offering flexible work arrangement while meeting business demands. It may seem like a win-win bond between employer and employee but it may actually be an unfair and lopsided relationship. Organizational effort to instill better balance among employees may backfire, if it is poorly managed.

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