



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE OF EMPLOYEES: A STUDY OF THE INDIAN BPO SECTOR EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 is the greatest pandemic in our history. The world that survived the economic downfall during “The Great Depression” is victim to yet another economic disaster. This paper intends to present how COVID-19 has had an elaborate impact on the work-life balance of employees. Approximately about 48% of the Indian population are individuals who win bread by being employed. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is one of the lucrative Indian industries that provided employment opportunities for over 74,000 employees, and the numbers are constantly on the rise. This study is majorly focused on the impacts on the work-life balance of Indian BPO employees. The pandemic has had its fair share of impact on employees from various walks of life. An in-depth analysis and comparison based on gender and age of BPO employees will form the nucleus of the study. Work-life balance- a myth or reality during the pandemic would be an arguable human resource topic, that could forever change its definition. The concept of working from home during this time sets the tone for the study to determine the impact of the pandemic assuming all the samples have an active family. The study calls for the implementation of a more qualitative research technique than a quantitative one. The outcome thus obtained will help in categorizing them into two major categories- positive and negative. The conclusion will be a thorough understanding and study of work-life balance, especially during situational emergencies, such as lockdown with reference to a real-world experience such as COVID-19.

KEYWORDS: HRM phenomenon, work-life balance, bpo sector, work from home

JEL CLASSIFICATION: O15, M54, M14



CITE THIS ARTICLE	ARTICLE HISTORY
Annie Rachel, N., & Rimo, Shibe., (2020, June). Impact of COVID-19 on Work-Life Balance of Employees: A Study of the Indian BPO Sector Employees. <i>Perspectives on Business Management & Economics</i> , 1(1), 142-151. Retrieved from http://www.pbme.in/papers/17.pdf	Received: April 25, 2020 Accepted: June 16, 2020 Published: June 20, 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

We live in an era where technology has taken the top position in all our lives. Early morning news reading has become digital to going to bed with mobile phones is the trend. This has significantly reduced human interactions and real-world experiences. Over the year human resources management subject has dealt with bringing balance and stability to the life of employees. One such debatable topic is the work-life balance of employees. The history of the term work-life balance is a fairly new and dates back only to the 1970's. The cornerstone to build the work-life balance concept was the fact that women also entered the working arena to make dual-income and build a financially stable home. In the 1970's workers in UK used to work an average of 14 to 16 hours a day and 6 days a week, this began creating health issues and social issues in the society. This was majorly because both the parents had become earning partners who were unable to spend any time of their children and also fell prey to health hazards due to long hours of work.

Since the introduction of this term, employers have constantly been implementing policies that support work-life balance of each employee. In the past, institutions were constantly adopting policies that created and kept family-friendly employees, which included 50% of merry employees, 36% higher rate of retention, and a 24% decrease in absenteeism (Cully,1999). An in depth understanding of the term will be discussed further in the conceptual frameworks. The current study focuses on the impacts of this phenomenon during the pandemic that struck the work in the beginning of 2020.

2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The major focus of the study is to determine the impacts of COVID-19 on the work-life balance of employees. The major focus on the impacts during the pandemic is the base on which the study is built. COVID-19 is one of the worst pandemics that hit the world hard. The history of pandemics in this world dates back to the B.C.'s (Before Christ). The world has seen many such pandemics including the black fever, Cholera, Asian Flu (Patterson, 1986). These pandemics also had their magnitude of impacts on many aspects of conducting business. However, COVID-19 has proven to be brutal and unsettling. The present world as is, forms the foundation on which the study is built. The study is constricted to the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) employees in India. This would enable narrowing down the study and aid in synthesizing the results more effectively.



3. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The present condition prevailing across the world has crippled the regular lives of people. The human resource management phenomenon are also victims to the situation. The various impacts have been on the HR front including dwindled pay, cost-cutting and layoffs. The work-life balance policy is no exception to the situation. It is important to study the effects of such pandemics on the work- life balance of salaried employees because the ultimate goal of the implementation of the policy remains vague and unclear in such situations. The problem focuses on answering the “what” question by determining the outcomes of the aforementioned pandemic on the work-life balance of employees. The investigation is confined to the employees of the BPO industry in India.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research is logical, considering the fact that the pandemic is happening right now. The significance of this study could not be higher at any given point in time than now because the pandemic is at its peak and the study would reveal more realistic results under such situations. This examination is conducted on the BPO sector in India. The BPO sector is one of the lucrative industries in India. India contributes about 51% of BPO requirements across the world (Rajeev & Vani, 2009). The Economic Times (2010) forecasted an increase in Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 15% in the year 2020. This means the export of BPO to the world from India is rising as always. Most employments in India is contributed by the BPO sector and would be a tempting field to carry out investigations.

5. SCOPE AND DELIMITATION

The pivotal goal of conducting this research is to better understand the concept of work-life balance under emergency situation like the ongoing pandemic, COVID-19. There have been many pandemics in history, each having its own share of impacts on various human resources phenomenon. This study is majorly focused on the cross-sectional analysis of the BPO industry only in India. The study reckons that the investigation is carried out only for the situation specified, it eliminates exploitable variables, receiving information only from a given set of population at that particular time. This investigation reviews a number of characteristics at a particular juncture. Overall, the pandemic sets the boundaries of this research, thus making it a situational study and its relevance to work-life balance in the course of human resource management topics.

6. FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

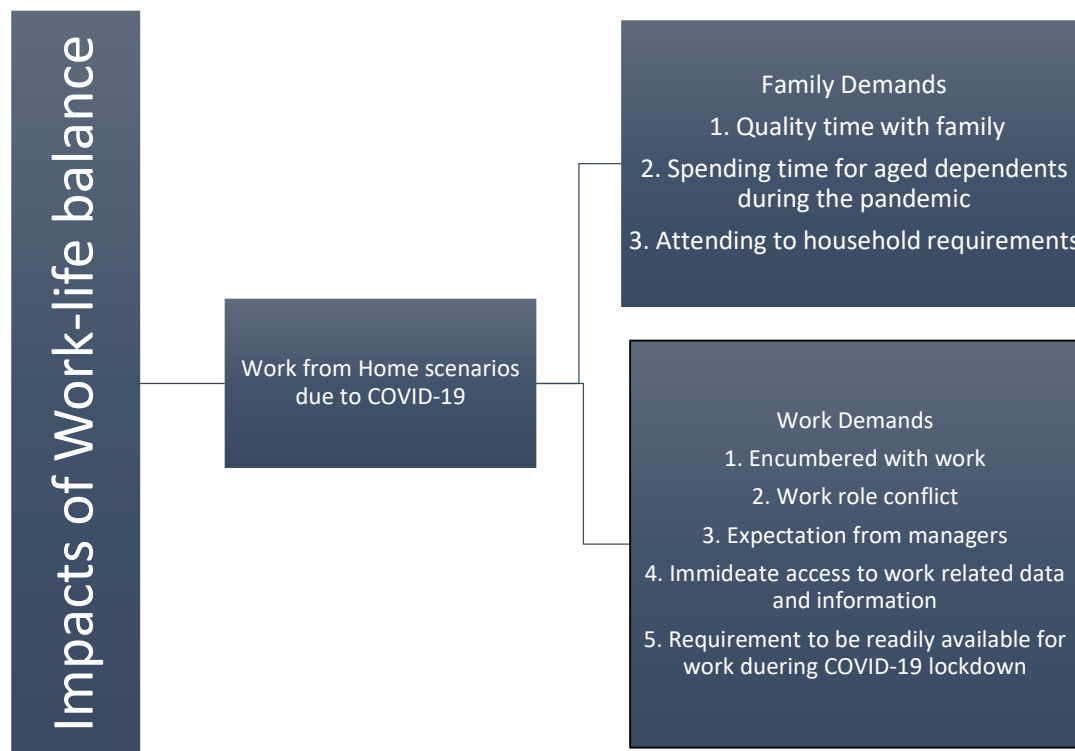
The conceptual framework of this investigation is to first ponder on given problem and create interrelationships that would result in outcomes (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The aim of this study is to collect primary and secondary data to understand and analyze on what could be the impacts of the current pandemic, COVID-19 on the work- life balance of employees especially in the Indian BPO sector. Bringing together the various component of research and the relationships between these components would allow in arriving at the required result. The major component of this research is the present scenario that has caused a complete



lockdown and has forced the option of working from home on employees. Secondly, the study is conducted to understand the meaning of the term “work-life balance” during such situations. This research could lead to turn of events in history by completely redefining work-life balance phenomenon at the given time. Lastly, the research is majorly conducted on the BPO industry in India that account for the major revenue from exports.

Establishing a relationship between the aforementioned elements of research would help in interpreting the conceived framework more effectively. The framework also surmise that this interrelation of elements would result in providing the outcome of the research and would help better in understanding work-life balance concept. This HR concept was originally created for employees to spend quality time physically with family amidst being employed in a full-time job. However, with change of events there could a be a forecasted disparity of work-life balance’s vice versa. Below diagram would enable to better understand the skeletal conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework



7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework forms the backbone of conducting the research. The aim of this section of study is to lay in limelight the underlying theories of work-life balance and thus enabling the analysis and synthesizing of data. Although work-life balance is a fairly new concept the researchers in the field of HR have been constantly defining the term and enabling implementation of policies pertaining to this term in organizations. The best way to begin



understanding the underlying theories would be to begin with understanding the definition of the term “work- life balance” and a brief explanation of a pandemic.

Work-life Balance - Definition

In the words of Hudson (2005), “Work-life balance, in its broadest sense, is defined as a “satisfactory level of involvement or ‘fit’ between the multiple roles in a person’s life” (Lazar, Osoian & Ratiu 2010).

From the work of Buddhapriya (2009), Work-life balance is defined as “the management of one’s professional responsibilities and family responsibilities towards children, ageing parents, and disabled family member, or a partner/spouse effectively. One can have work-family balance, but may or may not have anything left for oneself, for one’s community, for one’s own personal growth and development, rest and relaxation”

Work-life balance can also be defined in a context of conflict. In their work titled “Sources of Conflict Between Work and Family Roles”, Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) defined the term as “a form of friction in which role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects”

These are the few among the famous definition for the term work- life balance. The ultimate understanding of the definition would mean that there is a correlation between the work life and family life of each employee. Employees have roles at work and family that can never be compromised. The facts that are rudiment in the above definitions include a situation where each employee has an active family to take care and is an active earning member by being employed in an organization. The theories enlisted below will make emphasis on bringing about the relationship between these roles of an employee and will form the basis to analyze and synthesize information.

Prelude to the Pandemic: COVID-19

The term pandemic is a situation in which a particular geographical area or the whole world has been infected by a novel disease through spread of viruses and other microbiological organisms. A pandemic could happen due to various other reasons that results in the impact of an individual’s health (Morens, Folkers & Fauci 2009). One such event is the introduction of Corona virus to the world. The virus that claims Wuhan as its start point has already claimed close to 362, 786 lives across the globe and has impacted the routine of everything on the world (World Health Organization, 2020). The novel virus has also undesirable impacted the economy of countries across the world. It has also impacted the regular work hours and work spaces of each employee. Comprehensively COVID-19: the novel virus has only had negative impacts on the society from an economical perspective.

Underlying theories of work-life balance

Literatures have unveiled that there have been many challenges in forming an intersection between work and life. This is due to the lack of basic language and critical constructs. Having this as the crucial component the following theories have been analyzed so as to assist in calculating and responding to the problem statement at hand.



Spill-Over Theory

This theory was first developed by Edwards and Rothbard (2000). This theory is a process in which an individual is assumed to have more roles and the experiences of one role impacts the role of the same individual in another. The theory focused on the spill-over of mindset, values, expertise, and behavior in the various roles of the individual. The outcome of this theory would define the outcome as either or positive or negative (Morris & Madsen, 2007). Two interpretations of the spill-over theory are (i) the positive relationship between outside life and job satisfaction and life and work values (Zedeck, 1992) (ii) switching entire skills and behaviors between both life and work spheres (Repetti, 1987).

Compensation Theory

Compensation theory emphasizes on the fact that an individual puts in efforts to convert the negative experience in one domain by increasing the efforts for a positive experience at least in the other domain (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). In simple term an employee who is dissatisfied at his job would aim at performing better at home so there could be satisfaction and a positive outcome at home. According to this theory an opposite relationship exists between work and life, therefore a negative experience at work would result in an effort to make it a positive experience at home and vice versa. (Clark, 2000).

Resource Drain Theory

This theory translates to the shifting of resources such as time, money, attention from one domain to the other (Morris & Madsen 2007). The theory also assumes that these resources could also be shifted to other domains other than work and life.

Congruence Theory

It refers to how other variables that are not directly associated with work and life regulate the balance of the multiple roles. The other variable that the congruence theory takes into consideration includes the personality, behavior, genetic forces and socio-cultural forces (Staines, 1980; Zedeck, 1992)

Integration Theory

This theory refers to aggregate understanding that the healthy system of flexible and porous limits can enhance and encourage work-life balance and community- life domains. This theory further emphasizes on contemporary understanding that rearrange the traditional work-life set up and ensure that all elements of the set up including (employers, workers, and communities) have equal participation rights to create a holistic model of a balance between life and work (Morris & Madsen 2007). In circumstances where all parties in this theoretical equation shared equal responsibility, the outcome as comparatively better than the ones obtained in isolation (Googins, Pitt-Catsoupes & Lilly, 1997). This theory reemphasis on a positive outcome under circumstances.



Inter-role Conflict Theory

This theory refers to what happens when meeting the expectation of one domain makes it hard to meet the expectations in another (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985). In peer-reviewed papers this theory is also referred to as opposition or incompatibility theory. This theory takes into consideration the capacity of an individual in achieving the expectations of one particular domain which in turn impacts meeting the expectations of the other domain (Katz & Kahn 1978).

8. STUDY METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH PROCESS

The world has been under lockdown due to novel Corona Virus since mid of March 2020, therefore conducting a quantitative research was almost impossible. Therefore, the current study has been based on secondary data available from earlier literature. Procuring primary data from samples had been a fairly difficult, however for the purpose of more realistic results sporadic samples were collected from about 20 employees situated across India in the BPO sectors. The first-hand information obtained through the questionnaire survey was only to compare with the actual result obtained through qualitative analysis with the theoretical underlay.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis is the best way to carry out investigations on uncertain topic that cannot be pinned such as Work-life balance. This research has analyzed and documented about six theories that bring out comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Theories in a qualitative research aids as an “optical lens” through which the researchers are allowed to simplify and study various complicated phenomenon and social issues such as this one (Reeves et. al 2008).

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

A descriptive analysis is a method in which the characteristics of a particular demographic or a complicated phenomenon. This is a research method that is frequently in social sciences such as human resources management. This research is carried out when the study is pertaining to a particular scheme or category (Salaria, 2012). The current study is specific to a time period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this kind of research would serve as the best process to be implied.

9. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

To reiterate, the ultimate goal of this study is to understand and the impacts on the work-life balance of employees in the Indian BPO sector during the COVID-19. As determined earlier COVID-19 is one of the novel pandemics that has hit the world and has left an impact on the routine of the world. This has brought unspeakable loss to lives, businesses, health issues and so many more. However, the current study is carried out to answer the “what” question of the



problem statement. The outcome is based on the conceptual framework that was laid down earlier. It conceptualizes the fact that COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic and has severely impacted the lives of the salaried employees especially on the work-life balance front.

In agreement with the various theories that have been reviewed and understood, the conceptual framework has been descriptively analyzed to bring about the below outcomes. The below are presentation of obtained data divided into two main domains- family demands and work demands during COVID-19.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON FAMILY DEMANDS

The family demands focus on the three major scenarios including quality time with family, spending time for aged dependents during the pandemic and attending to household requirements. First demand of the family domain is the quality spend of time. From the responses from the samples 17 out of 20 employees mentioned that they were asked to extend work hours due to COVID-19 this means lack of time to spend on family. The major reason that was received for the reason to spend more time on work was the fear of losing their job during COVID-19 as they are sole breadwinners. This is a reflection of the resource drain theory where the individual transfers the available resource such as money to his family instead of time that is a scarce resource.

Spending time for aged dependents during the pandemic is the second expectation of the family demands. Aged dependents are the ones who are excited to spend more time while working from home because due to a busy schedule we fail to spend time otherwise. However, since 85% of the population spend more time of extended work hours while working from home, they are unable to spend more time with the aged dependent making a disagreement with the Integration theory. The factor that hinders the outcome of the integration theory is that the boundaries are not flexible or permeable.

Finally, attending to household requirements is a family demand is also not possible due to work-life imbalance and the individual used the other resources as per the resource drain theory. This takes into consideration that factors other than work and life as per the congruence theory. To attend to the household requirements socio-economic factors would impact the individual. In a household where the employee is pushed by socio-economic factors, the impact would be positive especially considering the fact that the curfews due to COVID-19 is rigid and compelling.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON WORK DEMANDS

The impact of COVID-19 on the work demand of BPO employees has been extreme and reflects the underlying work-life balance theories. The demands of work are encumbered with work, work role conflict, expectation from managers, immediate access to work related data and information, requirement to be readily available for work due to COVID-19 lockdown. All of the demands of work during the lockdown are based on the spill- theory where the individual focuses on discharging his official duties and due to that the demands of family are impacted therefore being unable to satisfy the demands on one domain more than the other.



All the demands of the work domain clearly gratify inter-role conflict theory. When an individual is focused on accomplishing his work demands he is unable to meet the family domain demands. This clearly is not a positive outcome of a work life balance as envisioned by visionaries of the phenomenon. The findings thus suggest that COVID- 19 has had more negative effects on the work-life balance of employees compared to a normal time frame. BPO employees who have been asked to extend their support from home face work-life imbalance amidst various other challenges during COVID-19 lockdown. These would result in an impact on the physical and mental health of BPO employees.

10. CONCLUSION

The above investigation is a complete descriptive analysis of the impact of work-life balance of BPO employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive analysis aided in examining the cross section during this emergency therefore these results will not imply to a study conducted otherwise. The family demands clearly depict a negative impact on BPO employees' work-life balance while they work from home. The work demands have managed to score a few positive impacts while the other situations have clearly attained negative impacts. The outcome therefore obtained includes lack of time to spend for dependents and a quality family time due to long working hours which is a result of not marking boundaries between office and personal space- work from home situation due to COVID-19. On an aggregate the negative impacts outnumber the positive ones on the work front. Concluding on a positive note in the words of Swati Rustagi, Amazon, "The world has survived different kinds of crises. People have seen world wars and the economic depression, but the human spirit has endured and survived."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I believe in no bigger force than the Almighty who I am immensely grateful for this opportunity. 2020 has been a difficult year for everyone, but I would like to remember and pay condolences for those who have lost their lives in this pandemic. I solemnly acknowledge all kinds of losses that my fellow humans have faced during COVID-19. The situation has inspired me carry out the research. Following the words of Author Laini Taylor, "Hope can be a powerful force. Maybe there's no actual magic in it, but when you know what you hope for most and hold it like a light within you, you can make things happen, almost like magic." I begin this chapter with the hope of a magic in these dark days.

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