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EDITORIAL

Achieving work–life balance

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Achieving a good balance between work and family commitments is a growing concern for contemporary employees and organisations. There is now mounting evidence linking work–life imbalance to reduced health and well-being among individuals and families. It is not surprising then that there is increasing interest among organisational stakeholders (e.g. CEOs, HR directors) for introducing work–life balance policies in their organisations. The purpose of the Special Issue of *Journal of Management & Organization* (ISBN 978-0-9775242-2-8) is to bring together current scholarship on theoretical and practice issues surrounding the 'achievement of work–life balance' in organisations.

We begin our coverage with an international expert commentary by Professor Steven Poelmans, a leading international expert at the frontiers of work–family research contributing to theoretical and practice advancements. The purpose of the expert commentary was to provide an easy to access statement on the current state of theoretical and practice issues surrounding the 'achievement of work–life balance' in organizations. We note that there is a real and continuing dilemma in the dissemination of new knowledge to the practitioner community. On the one hand most of the new knowledge created by the best researchers in any arena gets published in prestigious academic journals not accessible to the vast majority of practitioners. On the other hand the use of such knowledge to improve practice is limited in part due to this 'language barrier'. The conversation style expert commentary was developed in response to this long-standing complaint of the practitioner world. We believe that Professor Poelmans' exposition of the theoretical and practice issues surrounding the achievement of work–life balance in response to our questions will be a useful resource to practitioners and researchers.

This Special Issue presents the work of several scholars in the field via six papers that address some of the difficult issues surrounding the implementation of work–family balance policies in organisations. One of the impediments in the adoption of work–family balance policies in organisations is the inadequate development of HR metrics that demonstrate the impact of the work–family programs on organisational economic performance. Using the framework of resource-based view of the firm, Bardoel, De Cieri and Mayson explore what organizations are currently measuring with regard to work–family outcomes, how they are measuring it, and what they would like to measure. They identify four relevant dimensions: (1) *Planning and alignment* – the extent to which comprehensive planning processes are used to establish the business case and align the work–family strategy with the organization's priorities; (2) *Customization* – the extent to which the work–family initiatives have been appropriately customized and developed to deliver outcomes for the specific organization and

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individuals; (3) *Supportive culture and leadership support* – the extent to which steps have been taken to build a culture to support work–family initiatives and demonstrate leadership commitment; and (4) *Demonstrated value* – the extent to which the work–family initiatives are monitored to demonstrate value to all stakeholders and evaluated to identify opportunities for improvement. Bardoel, De Cieri and Mayson's work integrates a practitioners' perspective with the academic literature and offers a framework for the measurement of work–family initiatives.

Bretherton argues that employer perspectives on work–family balance are underdeveloped and under-represented within the context of public debate on work and family. She argues that expanding the range of programs available may *not* necessarily deliver a superior program for employees and employers. In an in-depth qualitative study, Bretherton compares the experience of two organisations which have implemented successful work–family programs by focusing exclusively on workplace and workforce need, rather than expanding the range of programs offered to employees. She argues that the needs of employers and employees may be better served by a shift in the policy debate toward program 'appropriateness' and improved program evaluation techniques, and away from 'choice'. While acknowledging that diversity in program design is obviously an important priority for both parties, Bretherton argues that the current debate has not substantially increased knowledge or awareness of how best to assess program 'fit' nor evaluate program effectiveness for either party.

Parkes and Langford assessed whether employees are satisfied with their ability to balance work and other life commitments in an Australian sample of over 16,000 employees. Results showed that of 28 organisational climate factors, work–family balance was the least related to employee engagement and intention to stay with an organisation. Parkes and Langford conclude that work–family balance policies are understood best in relation to other work practices, and should prompt organisations to implement broader organisational strategies. Creating work–family 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–family balance.

Kirkwood and Tootell investigated if entrepreneurship provided a better chance for achieving work–family balance than paid employment. Fifty-eight entrepreneurs were interviewed in New Zealand (32 women and 26 men) in order to explore the work–family conflict they face, the techniques they use to achieve work–family balance and the effectiveness of these strategies. Kirkwood and Tootell found that women entrepreneurs employ a number of flexible work practices, such as choosing where to work, when to work, and with whom to work as well as managing their roles within the family. However, Kirkwood and Tootell conclude that entrepreneurship may not be a panacea for achieving work–family balance and offer some suggestions on how entrepreneurs may better achieve work–family balance.

Abbot and De Cieri examine the general provision of work–family balance in an organization. Recognizing the potential for different goals and agenda, they propose that it is necessary to understand the perspectives of work–family balance held by both managers and by employees. To inform their research, they drawn upon the complementary theoretical bases of strategic choice theory, stakeholder theory, and the resource-based view of the firm. Using multiple methods of data collection and including management and employee perspectives, their qualitative case studies with two Australian subsidiaries of large multinational firms show that the influences on work–family balance are inter-related and, depending on specific organizational circumstances, some factors will have

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more influence on stakeholder support for work–family balance than do others. Abbot and De Cieri identify a range of implications relevant to theory, research and practice related to work–family balance in organizations.

Finally, Kalliath and Brough argue that although the term work–family balance is widely employed, an agreed definition of this term has proved elusive. They review the current somewhat confusing, array of definitions commonly expressed within the literature. Kalliath and Brough suggest the current definitions of work–family balance are of limited value for both the theoretical advancement of the construct and for practical Human Resource interventions. They review six conceptualisations of work–family balance found in the literature: (1) multiple roles; (2) equity across multiple roles; (3) satisfaction between multiple roles; (4) fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles; (5) a relationship between conflict and facilitation; and (6) perceived control between multiple roles. Based on this review they distil the core meaning of work–family balance as it has evolved in the literature and propose a new definition of work–family balance. Kalliath and Brough (2008) encourage further research to consider this new definition, specifically in terms of the development and validation of a measure that taps the new definition of work–family balance.

To sum up, it is clear that work–family balance is emerging as a key strategic element in the Human Resource Management (HRM) policies of successful organisations for attracting and retaining talented staff and for demonstrating the bottom-line impact of HRM programs promoting work–family balance. Other factors likely to increase the interest in work–family balance programs is the growing participation of women in the work-force and the anticipated worldwide shortage of skilled labour. It is our hope that this Special Issue of the *Journal of Management and Organization* (ISBN 978-0-9775242-2-8) will contribute useful information to both practitioners engaged in implementing work–family balance initiatives and to work–family balance researchers engaged in extending the frontiers of knowledge within this dynamic topic.

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