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Exploratory study of understanding hotel employees' perception on work–life balance issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores hotel employees' perception on work–life balance issues. In-depth interviews and self-administered questionnaires were used to collect the data. Factor analysis discovered seven factors: (1) enough time-off from work; (2) workplace support on work–life balance; (3) allegiance to work; (4) flexibility on work schedule; (5) life orientation; (6) voluntary reduction of contracted hours to cater for personal needs; and (7) upkeep the work and career—the determinants perceived by employees to attain “better” work–life balance in the dynamic hotel environment. Adopting an employee-centric and integrative approach are the critical success factors for implementation of a work–life balance program.

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1. Introduction

Long working hours, shift duties and handling demanding and difficult customers in hotels has become a take-for-granted phenomenon in the hospitality industry (Hsieh et al., 2004; Sarabakhsh et al., 1989). This stress creates a demand on an individual to make a decision on the balance between work and family. People have difficulty working in different roles or even multiple roles (as a supervisor in work, a parent at home, a child helping elderly parents in a Chinese cultural context) which leads to stress (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). In 1991, Nelson-Horchler conducted a survey and discovered that only 36% of the respondents rated a job as the most important priority in their lives. This finding was echoed by the generation X'ers emphasis on quality of life (Report, 1999). In other words, if employees feel that work–life is not balanced, they may leave the job and seek “quality of life”.

Using a work–life balance approach to mastermind employees' well-being has emerged as a strategic human resources management tool (method or issue) in the western world. Staines (1980) conducted a literature review of relationships between work and non-work. However, while there is solid debate about work–life balance in the context of long-hours culture (Cushing, 2004), MacInnes (2005) argued that there is little relationship between

workers' family situation and preferences for working fewer hours. On the other hand, there are many cases that suggest that work–life balance assists in retention, productivity and the recruitment of good staff (Evans and Vernon, 2007; Pocock, 2005).

In general, hotels provide a traditional remuneration package to employees for the purpose of attracting talents and increasing retention rate. It includes “benefits” such as leave for getting married, compassionate leave, holiday house, office parties, and training courses for personal development, etc. Many benefits are designed to be family-friendly to balance shift workers' family needs due to their erratic job nature. However, from the perspective of work–life balance in today's working environment, these “benefits” tend to be segmented and can only be regarded as a piece-meal approach to staff support. In a workplace that is characterized by long and irregular working hours, are the existing “family-friendly” related practices adequate for employees to deal with their daily family responsibilities? Do they take into account and individual's needs?

The hotel industry in Hong Kong has experienced an amazing recovery since the dark days of SARS¹ in 2003. Over the past few years, the government has put in a constant effort to bolster Hong Kong's tourism. Tourism has grown so extensively that it now plays a significant part in the local economy. With an addition of 12,326 new hotel rooms set to open in Hong Kong between 2007 and 2009, the employment market in the hotel industry is envisaged to

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¹ SARS is a deadly disease stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome. The outbreak of SARS, between the period from November 2002 to July 2003, not only caused 299 deaths in Hong Kong but also hit the local economy severely. Many hotels only recorded with single digit occupancy during the pandemic period.

remain extremely buoyant such that career opportunities with good prospects are plentiful (Wong, 2007). Subsequently, there has been a noticeable uplift in demand for talent in the hotel industry. Hoteliers in Hong Kong are now facing not only an increased turnover and poor staff retention locally but also have to compete in the regional market for skilled talents with neighboring Macau and economic power China.

As work–life balance is relatively new to Hong Kong, it is worth studying its possible application in a context characterized by long and irregular working hours. The government’s recent implementation of 5-day work week² for civil servants has also stirred up many discussions and one primary focus is on whether the private sector should also implement a 5-day work week. As the issue of work–life balance is now receiving greater attention in the community, undoubtedly, many organizations and employees across different industries are gradually becoming aware of practices for balancing work and life. Some companies may copy the best practices and some may simply focus on the 5-day work week alone due to the complex options available. Whether this is a solution to work–life balance is unclear because it is not a “one-size-fits-all” strategy and also poses significant financial implications.

This study purports to explore and gain a better understanding of the current situation in the hotel industry so as to provide HR practitioners a comprehensive solution to create a healthy and productive workforce as well as help their hotel to become an employer of choice to attract the best talent. The contribution of this study is to explore the perception of work–life balance issues among hotel employees in the Hong Kong hotel industry. By understanding their perspectives, hotel management can derive ways to improve staff productivity. As the jargon goes, “Happy Employees Produce Happy Customers.” By conducting this study, the findings should help both hotel managements and employees understand this intangible concept in human resources management. Specifically, the four objectives are to

- examine hotel employees’ perception over work–life balance issues;
- investigate any underlying dimensions influencing hotel employees in facing the work–life balance dilemma;
- investigate which factors affect overall perception of work–life balance; and
- make suggestions to hotel management on devising policies on work–life balance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work–life balance: a new thematic framework for the 21st century

There is an impressive history associated with the evolution of the concept of work–life balance since the eighteenth century perceived from the origin of trade union development (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007a). Due to the ever-changing social, economic and legislative conditions in different countries, there is literally no universal definition on work–life balance. Much discussion about the concept was triggered by the entry of a greater number of women into the workforce. Dual income parents, therefore, struggle to balance their work and family responsibilities. Many firms started to feature “family-friendly” related practices such as child care facility provision for

² Five-day work week was implemented by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region for its 163,000 civil servants. It was carried out in phases starting from July 2006 to be fully implemented by July 2007 (JobsDB, 2006).

workers with babies or school age children. Some exemplars of good practice also include paid maternity leave or opportunities to work more flexibly (Pocock, 2005).

At another level, in the U.K., several million people are acting as caregivers for elderly or disabled family members (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007b). Hence, employees who are single with no children may have other commitments within the community. There are also documented attempts to categorize employees’ needs according to the broad groups they belong to: baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y or the PC generation. Consequently, using the broad term “family-friendly” is too narrow a term and can, therefore, alienate some employees in today’s environment (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007b). Taking a step into the outer reaches of work and life, “work–life balance policies” and “workplace flexibility programs” are now increasingly used to collectively refer to a combination of initiatives designed to address individual’s needs. Thus, work–life balance should be defined in the direction of “people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as a norm to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society” (Employers and work–life balance, 2007).

Often when work–life balance is mentioned, time was a particularly important factor that could not be ignored. According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), time-based conflict is one of the three forms of work/life conflicts (in addition to strain-based and behavior-based conflicts) for employees. Many researchers have pointed out that time commitments and expectations, and the actual number of hours spent working, have a significant relationship with work and life balance (Duxbury et al., 1994; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Gutek et al., 1991). Apparently, it might be easy to understand that no one expects to enjoy a career that provides them with insufficient time for their personal life, family and friends.

2.2. Employers’ view: corporate social responsibility versus competitive advantage

Work–life balance programs have become a matter of interest around the world. In general, the cultural viewpoint of countries in the European Union (EU) including the U.K., differ from those of the United States. Often, programs in the U.K. came about as a result of government legislation backed by public mandate and is based primarily on corporate social responsibility, which refers to a concept that organizations have an obligation to consider the interests of customers, employees, shareholders, communities, and ecological considerations in all aspects of their operations. On the contrary, there has been little Government involvement in the U.S. Companies view work–life balance as a competitive advantage that allows them to recruit the best candidates and potentially increase employees loyalty to the company (Joshi et al., 2002).

Hong Kong employers have been encouraged by the State of Work Life Balance in Hong Kong 2006 Survey (HKIHRM, 2006a; Mahtani, 2006) to do more to promote work–life balance as well as a 5-day work week. One of the reasons might be those companies which need to recruit from a global talent pool must be conscious that a 5-day work week is now the norm in many economies. They need to initiate the new work scheme to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

2.3. Work–life balance for the hospitality industry

A culture of long working hours in the hospitality industry is so typical that many workers see their working hours as normal and

rarely question this practice. Recent studies on long-hours culture have brought the issue back under the spotlight (Cushing, 2004). Not only the overstretched employees but also all workers start to be aware of the impact of heavy workloads and long working hours.

Empirical research on employee burnout has been extensively conducted in the hospitality industry especially to explain why food-service managers suddenly quit their job (Tabacchi et al., 1990). Due to the phenomena of chronic labor shortage, role overload, long and irregular working hours exacerbated by considerable pressure over an extended time period, the prevalence of burnout is higher in service industries. This is so because one's job involves a high degree of interaction with clients (Vallen, 1993). A survey in the *Human Resource Management International Digest* (2002) indicated that managers who suffer from burnout are relatively young, under 40 years of age, and, most likely, working in front office or food and beverage service. A correlation of high burnout to high turnover was also recorded (Buick and Thomas, 2001). Thus, larger hospitality organizations in the U.K. or the U.S. are increasingly adopting sophisticated family-friendly practices to become an employer of choice (Doherty, 2004). It is the workplace which becomes a matter of issue in the case of poor performance, low morale or increased absenteeism irrespective of the source of employees' problem.

The first research touching the Asian lodging industry was by Hsieh et al. (2004) who investigated lodging managers' perceptions on how their work and personal life spills over using an instrument developed by MacDermid et al. (2000). The study focused on four major dimensions: work interference with personal life (WIP), personal life interference with work (PIW), work enhancement of personal life (WEP) and personal life enhancement of work (PEW). The WIP and PIW were measured by four conflicts: time-, strain-, energy-, and behavior-based conflict. While WEP and PEW were measured by five enhancements: time-, strain-, energy-, behavior- and support-based enhancements. Among all the demographic variables, only tenure at the employees hotel was found to have significance connection to the perceived difficulty and success regarding work and personal life balance (Hsieh et al., 2004).

2.4. Hong Kong: towards a paradigm shift

Prolonged overwork is considered to be neither healthy nor productive and the impact is significant (Buick and Thomas, 2001). However, few have questioned the non-existence of balance between work and life in Asia such as Japan and Hong Kong which are notoriously known for a workaholic culture. Death from overwork is not uncommon in Japan. A survey found that 355 Japanese workers became severely ill or died from overwork in 2006 with an alarming figure of 7.6% up from the previous year (HKIHRM, 2007a). The issue of long working hours is addressed in Japan as well as South Korea and Singapore through imposing laws to implement a 5-day work week or voluntary practice by the private sector (CSR Asia Weekly, 2006a, 2006b; Lyon, 2006).

Working long-hours has become socially acceptable in Hong Kong for a long time. One of the root causes of long working hours is that: despite the city's modern face, it remains an essentially paternalistic society. Staffs are afraid to leave the office until their boss does, otherwise they may be thought of lacking commitment. Moreover, in many companies, promotion depend on how late employees remain in the office rather than how productive or efficient they are (Taylor, 2006). Fortunately, following the wave of 5-day work schemes in Asia, the Hong Kong government finally took the step forward to implement a 5-day work week policy in

the hope of reducing work pressure and "to bolster civil service morale, promote social harmony and bring about positive impact on the community" (JobsDB, 2006).

In the aftermath of SARS, downsizing caused employees to tolerate longer hours for job security reasons (Luk, 2006). However, riding on the strong economic growth since 2005, Hong Kong reported the highest staffs turnover in Asia (HKIHRM, 2007b). Job vacancies and employee turnover rates continued to stay high in 2006 (HKIHRM, 2007c). It is now a polarized situation where employees hop around for better career prospects as well as pay and benefits. A recent survey on Hong Kong people also indicated that 83% of respondents believed work-life balance is important in today's workplace (HKIHRM, 2006a; Mahtani, 2006). This paradigm shift in the attitude of workforce, who now believe in family roles and responsibilities as well as physical and emotional well-being, is not to be overlooked. The workaholic culture in Hong Kong coupled with the highest employee burnout rate in Asia (HKIHRM, 2006b) makes work-life balance a "hot topic" from the HRM perspective for HR professionals in the city.

3. Methodology

3.1. Development of the measuring instrument: qualitative research-pilot test-final instrument

The research commenced by having 24 individual in-depth interviews categorized under (a) HR managers working in hotels; (b) hotel employees at different levels ranging from management to frontline staff; (c) industry professionals and government bodies who possessed relevant knowledge with regard to the research problem. Open-ended questions in bilingual and semi-structured format were designed to address the diversity found among interviewees. Empirical data generated from these probing questions was coded and mind-mapped in an iterative manner until six major dimensions were clustered using a dendrogram method were developed. Finally, 31 statements concerning the perception of work-life balance issues were developed based on both extensive literature review and the qualitative research.

To increase reliability and to assure appropriateness of the data collection instrument, the statements were subject to two phases of pilot test conducted with 24 people comprised of academia, human resources professionals, and master students studying hospitality management in university, hotel management staffs and hotel employees.

The English language of the questionnaire was reviewed. Six statements were subject to a refinement on language proficiency and to avoid workplace and cultural sensitivity. After the amendments, a Chinese translation was made and back translation from Chinese to English was performed to ensure its accuracy. A bilingual version of the questionnaire in English and Chinese was produced so as to cater the needs of the targeted respondents who are Hong Kong hotel employees.

The final questionnaire used in the survey consisted of two sections. The first section, including 31 statements, was designed to measure the perception by hotel employees on work-life balance issues. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on each statement from "1" as "strongly disagree" to "5" as "strongly agree". The last statement "I feel my work-life is balanced in this job" was designed to obtain an overall perception and treated as a dependent variable for the multiple regression analysis for determining the predictors (underlying dimensions) for work-life balance. The last section was the demographic information of respondents namely; gender, age, marital status,

number of children, education level, income level, department, position, years of service in the respective hotel and the hotel industry.

3.2. Data collection

Hotel managers (general managers, resident managers, human resources managers) were all contacted by formally inviting them to participate in this survey. Some hotels allowed the researchers to visit the site and distribute the questionnaire. Some assisted in distributing the questionnaires. The snowball convenience sampling method was adopted and 320 questionnaires were distributed in total.

3.3. Limitations of methodology

Several limitations of this study should be considered. First of all, the results may only apply to the current situation of the hotel industry in Hong Kong due to the unique blend of local east and west cultures. Second, the results may not represent the whole sample population, as convenient sampling and a relatively small sample size were employed. Third, the data collection period fell during the high season of the hotel industry as well as the busiest time of the year, and respondents bias should be accounted for.

4. Findings

4.1. Profile of the respondents

Two hundred and thirty valid responses, at a response rate of 72%, were received in mid-January 2007. Respondents were hotel employees in Hong Kong who were in full-time employment working in High Tariff "A" Hotels, High Tariff "B" Hotels and Medium Tariff hotels. A summary of the demographic profile of respondents is presented in Table 1. Male and female constituted 53.3% and 46.7%, respectively; 46.5% were aged between 26 and 35 years and 36.1% of respondents aged 36 or above. More than half of the respondents (60.4%) were single and 71.6% had no children. About 47% of the respondents received secondary education, 28% had vocational training and 25% had a university undergraduate or postgraduate degree. In terms of employment status, the majority (82%) were frontline employees who worked in the Food & Beverage Department, Front Desk or Housekeeping. Operational staff accounted for 56.1% while 18.9% were holding a position of manager or above. With respect to their personal monthly income, 67.4% of the respondents earned at a range of HK\$ 10,001–20,000. Respondents who worked in their respective hotel for over 3 years accounted for 53.3% and 73.9% have been working in the hotel industry for over 3 years.

4.2. Mean ratings of the work–life balance issues

Among all the work–life balance issues presented in Table 2, the statement, "I feel happy when I have quality family time for my family life," was rated highest with a mean score of 4.30. While the statement, "I have personal discretion over my starting and finishing times," scored the lowest (mean = 2.06) which implies employees have less decision power on setting their own working time, which is understandable due to the nature of hotel work. The overall perception statement, "I feel my work–life is balanced in this job," scored only 2.85 which implies hotel employees disagree with this statement, and the imbalance between work and life is perceived in Hong Kong.

Table 1
Demographic profile of respondents (N = 230)

Characteristics	Respondents (%)	Frequency
Sex		
Male	53.3	122
Female	46.7	107
Age		
18–25	17.4	40
26–35	46.5	107
>35	36.1	83
Marital status		
Single	60.4	139
Married	39.6	91
Have children		
No	71.6	164
Yes	28.4	65
Education level		
Secondary or below	46.9	107
Vocational training	28.1	64
University or above	25.0	57
Department		
Food & Beverage	35.7	81
Front Desk	26.4	60
Housekeeping	19.4	44
Others	18.5	42
Position		
Operation staff	56.1	128
Supervisor	25.0	57
Manager or above	18.9	43
Monthly income (in HK\$)		
≤10,000	16.7	38
10,001–20,000	67.4	153
>20,000	15.9	36
No. of years in the respective hotel		
<1	16.6	38
1–3	30.1	69
3–9	21.0	48
>9	32.3	74
No. of years working in the hotel industry		
<3	26.1	60
3–9	22.6	52
>9	51.3	118

5. Data analysis and discussions

5.1. Factor analysis

The 30 work–life balance issues were factor analyzed using principal components analysis with varimax rotation method to determine the underlying dimensions. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were pursued to test the fitness of the data. The result of KMO was 0.773 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be 2268.35, with a 0.000 significance level. These figures suggest that the use of factor analysis was appropriate. The factors derived following Hair et al. (2005) suggestions that eigenvalue must be higher than 1.0 and factor loading should be greater than 0.5.

Ten dimensions were initially extracted from the 30 statements. For the ninth and tenth dimensions, only one statement was loaded and therefore these two dimensions were deleted as they did not achieve the representation purpose of a factor. As shown in the remarks of Table 3, two statements were deleted as factor loading <0.5. Six additional statements were deleted after conducting Cronbach alpha reliability test within each factor. After the reduction work, the remaining 20 statements constitute seven

Table 2
Mean ratings of perception on work–life balance issues ($N = 230$)

	Mean ^a	S.D.
Work–life balance issues		
I feel happy when I have quality family time for my family life	4.30 ^b	0.98
I have different responsibilities to meet during different life stages	4.17	0.74
I want to spend more time to fulfill my aspirations/interests	4.14	0.74
I would consider working fewer hours per shift each day (exclude meal time) for a pro-rated salary	3.97	1.04
I find it easy to concentrate at work because of family support	3.65	0.99
I will choose to give up a higher position during a particular life stage as a trade-off for personal and family happiness	3.64	0.84
I can take time-off easily at short notice for unpredictable circumstances (e.g. child is sick)	3.58	1.09
I work very smoothly to handover to the next shift because of the flexibility provided by the hotel	3.58	0.92
My co-workers are very supportive when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work	3.51	0.90
I look forward to being with the people I work with each day	3.49	0.93
I accept working extra hours each day because I am committed to my job	3.43	1.04
My supervisor is understanding when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work	3.32	1.01
I do not bring work home	3.31	1.17
I accept working extra hours each day because it is essential to progress in my career	3.10	1.05
I can schedule my preferred days off supported by my team	3.09	1.17
I can easily manage my work with my personal and family life because of the flexibility provided by the hotel	3.01	1.03
I will consider changing from working full time to part time for a time frame, say 6 months, 1 year or 2 years, to fulfill my personal needs (e.g. 4 h per day, 5 days per week on permanent contract but on pro-rated salary and benefits)	2.93	1.13
I live nearby hotel to minimize the commuting time	2.86	1.34
I choose not work over time even I got paid or compensated with day off	2.86	1.12
I can finish work within contracted hours (i.e. 8 h per shift)	2.83	1.23
I plan to have children within 5 years	2.78	1.28
Supervisor allows me to change my roster if the daily working hours are not consistent	2.76	1.18
I accept working at least 10 h a day to keep up my workload	2.67	1.13
I have enough time for sleeping	2.60	1.07
I have enough time after work to carry out personal matters	2.50	0.96
I have enough time for my family (spouse and or children)	2.42	1.03
I have enough time for my friends	2.34	0.97
I feel very energetic after work	2.32	1.00
I have personal discretion over my starting and finishing times	2.06 ^c	1.08
Overall perception about work–life balance		
I feel my work–life is balanced in this job	2.85	1.05

^a Five-point Likert scale was used for rating the perception ranging from ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”.

^b The highest mean among all issues.

^c The lowest mean among all issues.

dimensions. In descending order of factor mean, the factors derived are

- Factor 5 Life orientation (mean = 4.05)
- Factor 3 Allegiance to work (mean = 3.52)
- Factor 2 Workplace support on work–life balance (mean = 3.47)
- Factor 6 Voluntary reduction of contracted working hours to cater personal needs (mean = 2.90)
- Factor 7 Upkeep work and career (mean = 2.89)
- Factor 4 Flexibility on work schedule (mean = 2.60)
- Factor 1 Enough time-off from work (mean = 2.42)

5.1.1. Factor 1: enough time-off from work

Three statements were loaded into this factor with reliability alpha at 0.86 and an overall mean value of 2.42. This factor was negatively pursued (its mean value was less than 2.5). Hotel employees did not agree that they get enough time-off from work. Long working hours and a physically demanding work nature is a fact of life in the hotel field. However, this becomes a key hindrance factor in making work–life unbalanced in the Hong Kong hotel industry.

As more and more degree-holders enter the hotel work force, it triggers a different perspective and expectation, such as generation Y workforce. More attention should be paid to the result that the higher education level employees receive, the higher agreement they had to the factor of “enough time-off-work”. Nowadays there is a trend that more and more well-educated people enter into hospitality industry in Hong Kong, and tend to have higher career expectations as well as to request a higher quality of their personal

life outside of work. They care more about enough time for relaxation and to share with their family and friends. With regard to this aspect of change of workforce, “enough time-off from work” should be a critical factor to be addressed from an employee motivation perspective.

5.1.2. Factor 2: workplace support on family matters

Three statements were loaded into this factor. The alpha value is 0.80 and the factor mean is recorded at 3.47. “Family matters” is a collective term referring to childcare or family responsibilities as well as the non-conventional ones in a broader context. A good management system can also be achieved by a well-designed roster system, job re-design and cooperation between departments aiming to facilitate a smooth handover of duties. For example, a front desk officer would be able to handover their duties to the next shift worker and leave on time on a normal business day instead of following up unnecessary matters with the Accounts Department. However, very often, line managers are the ones that can “make or break” the policy and may affect how the system works. A matter of face may develop implicitly among the team because of the inappropriate practice by the manager. Worst of all, a non-supportive environment would be cultivated among team members. Whether an employee could be released from work on time to provide him/her more free time would require the line managers’ awareness on supervising flexibility and building up a bond of trust and cooperation.

5.1.3. Factor 3: allegiance to work

Three statements were loaded into this factor with an alpha value of 0.74 with the factor mean of 3.52. Allegiance to work is an

Table 3
Factor analysis with varimax rotation and reliability tests of work–life balance issues ($N = 230$)

Issues	Factor loading	Factor name (factor mean)	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Cumulative variance	Cronbach alpha
I have enough time for my friends	0.86	Factor 1: enough time-off from work, 2.42	5.78	10.14	10.14	0.86
I have enough time for my family	0.84					
I have enough time after work to carry out personal matters	0.82					
My co-workers are supportive when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work	0.82	Factor 2: workplace support on work–life balance, 3.47	2.92	9.24	19.38	0.80
My supervisor is understanding when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work	0.79					
I work very smoothly to handover to the next shift because of a good management system	0.75					
I look forward to being with the people I work with each day	0.75	Factor 3: allegiance to work, 3.52	2.22	8.88	28.26	0.74
I accept working over time each day because I am committed to my job	0.71					
I find it easy to concentrate at work because of family support	0.70					
I have personal discretion over my and starting and finishing times	0.78	Factor 4: flexibility on Work schedule, 2.60	1.86	8.03	36.27	0.72
I can change my roster if the daily working hours are not consistent	0.76					
I can schedule my preferred days off supported by my team	0.63					
I can finish work within my contracted hours (e.g. 8 h per shift)	0.60					
I want to spend more time to fulfill my aspiration/interest	0.80	Factor 5: life orientation, 4.05	1.54	6.89	43.15	0.65
I have different responsibilities to meet during different life stages	0.80					
I fell happy when I have quality time for my family life	0.53					
I would consider working few hours per shift each day at a pro-rated salary	0.82	Factor 6: voluntary reduction of contracted working hours to cater for personal needs, 2.90	1.48	6.24	49.40	0.61
I will consider changing from working full time to part time for a time frame, say 6 months, 1–2 years to fulfill my personal needs	0.78					
I accept working at least 10 h a day to keep up my workload	0.76	Factor 7: upkeep the work and career, 2.89	1.27	6.00	55.40	0.50
I accept working extra hours each day because it is essential to progress in my career	0.57					

Five-point Likert scale was used for rating the indicators ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. Statement “I have enough time for sleeping” was deleted after internal reliability test out from factor 1. Statement “I can easily manage my work with my personal and family life because of the flexibility provided by the hotel” was deleted after internal reliability test out from factor 2. Statement “I feel very energetic after work” was deleted after internal reliability test out from factor 3. Statement “I can take time-off easily at short notice for unpredicted circumstances” was deleted as factor loading < 0.5 and out from factor 5. Statement “I will choose to give up a higher position during a particular life stage as a trade-off for personal and family happiness” was deleted after internal reliability test out from factor 6. Statement “I choose not work over time even I got paid or compensated with day off” was deleted as factor loading was < 0.5 and out from factor 7. Statement “I plan to have children within 5 years” and statement “I would accept working fewer hours per shift each day at pro-rated salary” were deleted after reliability test and thus no factor 8. Statement “I live nearby the hotel to minimize the commuting time” was single loaded and thus was not accepted as factor 9. Statement “I do not bring work home” was single loaded and thus was not accepted as factor 10.

ideal outcome for employers in a workplace as it implies the ultimate support and loyalty expressed by employees to the company. Staff commitment and loyalty towards their work and company exert a bonding force to maintain work–life balance. Their sense of commitment was most likely driven by job security and career goal. Needless to say, employees having stronger ties to the company from the cornerstone of the company’s success. Staffs are willing to work overtime when they are committed. Another key finding is that if staffs look forward to working with others (team colleagues), they are willing to contribute more. Family support further enhances staff allegiance to work and was found assisting work–life balance positively.

5.1.4. Factor 4: flexibility on work schedule

Four statements were loaded with an alpha and factor mean value of 0.72 and 2.60, respectively. The four statements encompassed in this factor were unique in the hotel arena as a norm for shift workers who tend not to possess a complete discretion of control and choices in relation to their work schedule. This could be a potential problem with an employee who suffered from burnout as a result of the complexity of time- and strain-based conflict. From the factor mean, it shows that hotel employees have less flexibility in controlling their time and roster. It is understandable that a hotel job is operated 24 h a day and is highly labor intensive. Everyone is assigned to be “present” for a duty at a certain time slot per day. Even during holidays, staffs are allocated

into the roster for maintaining the service. This factor reveals the fact that hotel employees have limited flexibility on setting their own working schedule.

5.1.5. Factor 5: life orientation

Three statements were loaded into this factor. The alpha value is 0.65 and the highest mean value of 4.05 among all factors. Staffs show greatest agreement when they expressed their wants to pursue personal interests or aspirations. They agreed that they need to fulfill other responsibilities in life–strain- and family-conflicts exist. They feel happy when they have quality time with their family. In a capitalist society where economic activity is the principal channel, full-time work employment is by far the most common type of central life activity. Job–family conflicts often caught up by dual-income earners due to time demand on conventional responsibilities such as career goal, childcare and elderly care. When it comes to a more in-depth understanding of life responsibilities, life orientation will project a wider spectrum to address individual’s need at different life stages.

5.1.6. Factor 6: voluntary reduction of contracted working hours to cater for personal needs

Two statements were loaded into factor 6 with reliability alpha at 0.61. Its overall mean value was 2.90. As discussed in Section 5.1.4 that emphasized scheduling discussed the importance of providing flexibility to enable individual’s control and choices, this

factor took a micro perspective focusing on working hours alone. A common example being widely adopted in western countries is the option of working fewer hours at a pro-rated salary and benefits. For example, a half-time job provides the flexibility for an employee to consider working 4 h less everyday but keeping the 5-day or 6-day work week pattern. Employees can trade off their salary in exchange for more free time with the huge benefit of job security. The reason why employees tend to project a neutral stance on this factor but leaning towards the other side is because this kind of work arrangement is not common in Hong Kong. Though there are casual laborers commonly found in the hotel industry, they are regarded as “stand-by” staffs who are not employed permanently or on a contractual basis. Thus, it is hard for employees to weigh its merits and drawbacks. The purpose of earning less but in exchange for more personal time is clearly seen.

5.1.7. Factor 7: upkeep the work and career

Two statements were loaded into this factor. The alpha and factor mean value was loaded at 0.50 and 2.89, respectively. The majority of the respondents slightly agree to work extra hours in order to progress their work and aim for career progression. Working 10 h per day is accepted, though it is not preferred in general. This empirical finding clearly articulates that it is not the “long-hour” pattern that attributes to the feeling of imbalance in a hotel setting in which employees were actually prepared for, but their psychological acceptance. This “hard-working” culture exists in the Hong Kong hotel industry, and maintaining a job and fighting for better career prospects makes hotel employees willing to work extra hours.

5.2. Regression analysis on factors affecting work–life balance

A multiple regression was conducted using the statement, “I feel my work–life is balanced in this job,” as a dependent variable, the seven dimensions derived were independent variables. Factors 6 and 7 were not accepted in the model as significant is less than 0.05. Five factors exerted influences on the dependent variable. Four (factors 1, 3, 2, 4) exerted positive correlation while factor 5 (life orientation, $\beta = -0.28$) exerted negative correlation with dependent variable (Table 4).

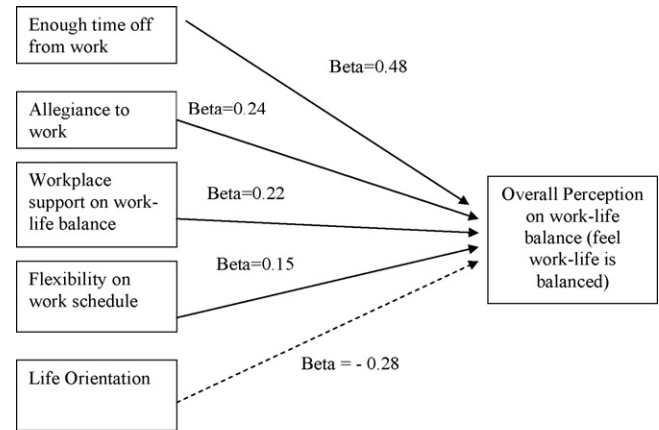
This finding revealed that employees prefer more life orientation (factor 5), they tend to disagree that their work–life is balanced. This is easily acknowledged as staff who look for personal aspiration will find their work and life not balanced.

Factor 1: Enough time-off from work scored the highest beta value 0.48 which means if staffs are given enough time-off from work, they will feel their work and life will be more balanced. Staff showing allegiance to work (factor 3, $\beta = 0.24$) will consider the work and life balanced. The support from the workplace (factor 2, $\beta = 0.22$) is revealed to have positive impact on helping employees balance their work–life. Finally, the allowance of more flexibility on the work schedule (factor 4, $\beta = 0.15$) will make

Table 4
Multiple regression on work–life balance issues with overall perception as dependent variable

Independent variables	Beta	Significance	Ranking
Factor 1: enough time-off from work	0.48	0.000**	1
Factor 3: allegiance to work	0.24	0.004*	2
Factor 2: workplace support on work–life balance	0.22	0.008*	3
Factor 4: flexibility on work schedule	0.15	0.024*	4
Factor 5: life orientation	-0.28	0.007*	5

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$.



Remarks:

Line in solid represents positive correlation on Y (overall perception on work–life balance), while line in dotted represents negative correlation.

Fig. 1. Relationships between derived factors and overall perception of work–life balance.

staff feel there is more harmony between work and life issues. A model showing the relationships between the derived factors and the dependent variable is shown in Fig. 1.

6. Recommendations

Pursuant to the abridged results and discussions above, several notable steps are worthy of contemplation by hotel management as follows:

6.1. Listen to employees and appreciate their differences and needs

Using traditional ways of demographic profiling to understand employees' needs may not meet the cultural diversity of today's workforce in the hotel industry where long working hours is a norm. However, collecting feedback and suggestions from employees promotes an open and more transparent management culture in the workplace. All in all, the best way is to get qualitative feedback from employees directly. It is suggested to talk to as many staffs as possible, then collate their views and seek consensus. This should be carefully planned in various forms such as focus group, individual interviews, discussion sessions or web-based surveys to stimulate mutual communications.

6.2. Provide more free time and increase flexibility on work schedule

The dimension of time is of paramount importance, as an uncontrollable limit posed on employee's working lives is an impediment to achieve work–life balance. The voice of hotel employees, particularly shift workers, in their quest for more free time was clearly articulated on empirical grounds. There is a possibility to consider transforming daily hours and weekly hours into monthly hours or even annualized total. A compressed work week found in the study was successful to alleviate the problem of a time-based conflict and achieved a higher level of allegiance to work. There are also many other types of flexibility in relation to time schedules. For instance, daily flex-time, three-shift working, working half-time and reserve hours, or even adopting HR policies to allow employees to trade off their salary in exchange for more free time, etc. Flexibility could also be in the form of a management mechanism that allows employees to choose their preferred days off or change the scheduled roster on

a fair rotation base so as to accommodate personal needs when required.

6.3. Provide workplace support on family matters

Workplace support on family matters is inherently a basic system that requires not only a good management system (Marriott and Brown, 1997) but also a consistent effort of supervisors and co-workers as it is one of the important ways to counteract burnout (Tabacchi et al., 1990). Through experience sharing, benchmarking and innovative thinking, stakeholders may further allow initiatives to emerge when the time is ripe. An added caveat is that as organizations differ, initiatives should be subject to the job nature, the needs of different divisions and its strategic position in the organization as a whole.

6.4. Test the water using a pilot program

In the situation of the hotel industry, organizations can test out innovative ideas gradually before a wider roll-out of a company-wide program (Munck, 2001). For instance, it can begin with food-service operations whose managers tend to have a higher burnout rate (Tabacchi et al., 1990). Open communication with employees on both the benefits and shortcomings of the work–life program is necessary to be included in the development process.

7. Conclusion

In view of the growing interest in mechanisms that can retain and attract skilled workers, this study provides valuable implications for the hotel industry on the aspects of what organizations can do to improve employees' work–life balance. The most prevalent factor is to provide “more free time” so as to turn around their perception of “not having enough time-off-work”. This is a significant finding in the study as it provides insight for HR professionals in the “crossroad” as to whether their hotel should implement a five-day work week policy.

A compressed work week transforming the 6-day work week pattern to 5-day has proved to be successful. The study also opens up the direction of devising other innovative ideas that “accommodates” employees with more free time. More importantly, this is not the only factor. The study indicated that it should go laterally with six others. These are “workplace support on family matters”, “allegiance to work”, “flexibility on work schedule”, “life orientation”, “voluntary reduction of contracted hours to cater personal needs” and finally, “upkeep the work and career”. All in all, these postulate the core concept of work–life balance in a workplace, i.e. a good management system and culture that offers more choices and control for individuals to deal with their personal and family matters.

Working step-by-step is of utmost importance. It is suggested to begin with recommendations that are relatively easy to implement such as “Listen to employees and appreciate their differences and needs”. It can then be followed by “Providing workplace support on family matters” and “Provide more free time and increase flexibility on work schedule” as they are the two biggest hurdles that relate to financial implications and transformation of culture. A recent example of the step-by-step approach is expressed by the “We Care” program launched by the Eaton Hotel in Hong Kong. By giving staffs 3 days off every 2 weeks before a full implementation of the 5-day work week, the hotel wants to enhance their reputation as a caring employer and to set a good example for the hospitality industry (To, 2007).

Last but not least, rushing towards a work–life balance program in a scattergun way can only contain the company's turnover rate

for a while. Yet, it is not the “glue” which holds employees together and retains them as members of a happy workforce in a long run. Using a simple investment concept – small investment generates small return, large investment for larger return and higher risk – adopting a single initiative only requires little investment but it will never be a comprehensive solution in this regard. Transforming the workplace proactively using a combination of well-designed initiatives in the form of an integrated approach and in consideration of all risk factors is the direction to yield an expected outcome.

8. Future research direction

As this is an exploratory study, it is suggested that future research should be conducted on a larger scale and focus on refining the current work–life balance issues. Furthermore, to enhance the development of work–life balance initiatives in the strategic HRM arena, it is necessary to obtain insight into the properties of its effectiveness and implementation. As corporate decisions rely on financial justifications, a longitudinal study in hotels on work–life balance policies and practices with respect to workplace transformation and cognitive shift among employees will be effective to provide implications for the hospitality industry in the longer term.

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