



The impact of work-life balance on employee absenteeism: An empirical study

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Abstract

Work life balance is at the heart of the innumerable employees and remains a cornerstone for maintaining workforce wellbeing. Recently, records have shown dramatic increment in both planned and unplanned absenteeism due to poor work life balance in workplaces. Although work life balance has been extensively researched in developed countries, little studies have been carried out in developing countries. Every year South African organisations lose about R25 billion (US1,3 billion) due to unplanned absenteeism. This is a cause for concern as developing countries need policies that avert absenteeism and support work life balance. Hence, the overarching purpose of this study is to assess the effects of work life balance on employee absenteeism with a leading electronic organisation in South Africa serving as the case study. The study employed descriptive research design and quantitative research approach. Simple random sampling technique was employed as part of probability sampling procedure. The data was collected using closed ended questionnaires from call centre of a leading electronic organisation in South Africa. For analysis of data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The key finding of this study revealed that work-life balance has a significant impact on employee absenteeism. Management should encourage employees to exercise work life balance in their day-to-day lives to alleviate stress related to family and burnout related to work which stood to be a fulcrum for absenteeism.

Keywords: Employee Absenteeism; Work-life Balance; Planned Absenteeism; Unplanned Absenteeism; Developing Economies

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1. Introduction

Developing economies face unique issues which usually fall outside idealistic approaches that apply to developed economies and mostly face them in a more muted form. Most organisational workplaces in developing countries are still less progressive and require serious strategies and interventions to tackle issues especially relating to work life balances and absenteeism. Work life balance has remained a big challenge which has been grappled by conflicts and contradictions amongst management and trade unions. In the past, an employee was able to differentiate between the two worlds, namely work and home environment, because once he or she walked out of the workplace, the workday lapsed, and the personal life immediately starts. With the progression of technology and other innovations, an employee can browse emails at his or her kid's soccer practice, prompting increasingly virtual work environments (Nagy, 2020; Faiz, Singh and Mathur, 2019). For many years, work life balance has been taken for granted. The issue of absenteeism has increased due to poor work life balance emanating from unplanned leave usage by employees in various organisations (Isnatun and Riyanto, 2020). Every year South African organisations lose about R25 billion (US1,3 billion) due to unplanned absenteeism (News24, 2018). The imbalance that the employees entangled in between their personal lives and work lives exacerbates the rate of absenteeism. This lack of balance sees the employees using more of their time for work purposes and little time to rest. The challenge arises when this imbalance causes employees to experience physical, mental and emotional strain, which in turn lead to fatigue, burnout, and subsequently, the inability to report for duty. The aim of this study is to assess the effects of work life balance on employee absenteeism with a leading electronic organisation in South Africa serving as the case study. The study sought to establish if there is a clear link between absenteeism and work life balance. It is deemed necessary to study the concepts in order to make sound strategies which can yield long-term positive results. The objectives of this study are to examine the impact of work life balance on employee absenteeism, and to ascertain if the employees' leave utilisation can improve work life balance.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of work life balance

Work life balance began in the nineteenth century after numerous attempts by workers to demonstrate their disapproval against long working hours in the factories (Hogarth and Bosworth, 2009). Most employers in the nineteenth century sought to increase their production by working long working hours at the expense wellness of the employees. This went on in the early twentieth century when several labour unions demanded that there be a limit on the number of hours an employee should work. The workplace that meets the needs of employees is required in the contemporary management. Malik et al. (2019) state that the top three workplace issues are salary, benefits and work life balance. For the purpose of this study, the latter was the aspect focused on. According to Anisha and Melvin (2020), work life balance relates to the extent to which an individual is engaged in, and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role. There are three components of work life balance, namely time balance (equal time deShanker and Kaushalvoted to work and family), involvement balance (equal involvement in work and family) and satisfaction balance (equal satisfaction with work and family). Abeykoon and Perera (2019) state that proper work life balance is accomplished when a person can function well both at work and home and having minimal conflicts between the work realms. Employees who

have managed to strike a balance between their work and their personal lives have higher levels of job satisfaction, perform much better in their roles and therefore, have lower instances of employee absence – whether planned or unplanned (Utete et al., 2022). Bocean et al. (2023) studied on work-Life balance and employee satisfaction found that the balance between professional and personal life generates satisfaction. Alfatihah et al. (2021) studied that the influence of work-life balance on job satisfaction on work-life balance affects job satisfaction. In the current state of hybrid working, it is difficult to differentiate between work and life as COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the technological and technical advancements which allow for a seamless transition between the two spectra of life. This has recently increased due to the usage of mobile devices which make employees work in the comfort of their homes.

2.2. The concept of absenteeism

There is no universal definition of absenteeism, but various researchers define it as a lack of employee presence during working hours (Grigore, 2020; Wahid et al., 2019). It is key to clarify that there are two types of absenteeism, namely planned and unplanned. Planned absenteeism is brought to the attention of the employer in advance (at least two weeks in the case of the call centre) and which does not cause disruptions in working hours (Duncombe, 2019). Unplanned absenteeism, on the other hand, is unpredictable both in terms of the duration of the incident, the frequency, and the foresight of who will be absent on a particular day (Plummer, 2018). Some causes of unplanned absenteeism include illness and emergencies, job dissatisfaction and poor work-life balance (Wahid et al., 2019). Unplanned absenteeism causes social, human, and financial costs to an organization as it brings about disturbances in the working patterns, confusion among employees who must take charge of another person's tasks, and it is costly to the organisation (López-Bueno et al., 2020). According to News24 (2018), combined losses from both planned and unplanned absenteeism equates to 6.5 billion Gross Operating Profits (GOP) or R122 billion to the nation of South Africa. It is important for absenteeism to be closely monitored to easily identify any opportunistic leave usage, especially that of an unplanned nature.

2.3. The relationship between work life balance and absenteeism

There have been several identified causes of employee absenteeism and among them are stress and burnout emanated from poor work-life balance. Attar et al. (2020) define stress as the physical and psychological response to demands that weigh on an individual's coping resources and in its negative form indicates that coping resources available to the employee are insufficient to meet the demands at hand. Unchecked and ill-managed work life balance causes employees to feel overwhelmed, lack energy, feeling emotionally, physically exhausted, and eventually begins to be absent from work (Jaharuddin and Zainol, 2019). If the event is not resolved speedily, the employee experiences anxiety, depression, mood disorders, sleep disturbances which eventually lead to absenteeism. When this occurs repeatedly over a period and coping mechanisms diminish which may result in quitting the job (Thamrin and Riyanto, 2020). It is, therefore, extremely critical for employees to thrive towards striking a balance between work and life (non-work). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis was developed:

H₁ Work life balance has a significant impact on absenteeism.

2.4. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by conflict theory in explaining the relationship between work life balance and absenteeism. The conflict theory speculates that fulfilment and achievement in one aspect of life results in sacrifice in the other aspect (Brief et al., 2005). This assumes that the two domains, namely, life and work, are fundamentally incompatible with each other and that they have different norms and requirements. Work life balance is conceptualised as a form of inter-role conflict in which the pressures of the role from the work and family domains are mutually inharmonious. This means that when an individual participates in one role it makes it difficult to participate in the other role based on the amount of time and energy available to the individual. Hebdon and Noh (2013) dissects this theory into three components, namely, time-based conflict (occurs because of limited time which makes it difficult to manage long working hours, irregular shift work and work time not being flexible), stress-based conflict (occurs due to the psychological demand of work, interaction fatigue and job burnout) (Ogechi and Nwaeke, 2019), and behaviour-based conflict (occurs when work demands behaviours which may not be conducive to a family role. In the context of this study, the conflict theory explicitly shows an inverse relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism. The higher the organisation under this study demands excessive devotion to work duties with less time for life activities for its employees the more it experiences high unplanned absenteeism.

3. Method

For this study, descriptive research design was adopted. Descriptive research design may be used for analytical or predictive purposes and the nature of the relationships of the phenomenon (Kaliyadan and Kulkarni, 2019). For this study, the focus was on the latter, it answers the key research question which focuses on how the work-life balance impact absenteeism. In terms of research approach, quantitative research approach was selected as the suitable approach that can mathematically measure the relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism. This is because the quantitative research approach is based on investigating a certain quantity in relation to another. The main purpose for this type of study is to assess the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable in a population. In the context of this study, it expresses quantitatively the relationship between work life balance and employee absenteeism. The quantitative research approach helps to determine if indeed there is a level of congruency between work life balance and absenteeism. It is applicable to phenomena that can be expressed in terms of quantity and involves the generation of data which can be subjected to rigorous analysis in a formal and rigid fashion (Mohajan, 2020). The target population for this study was the call centre employees at leading electronic organisation in South Africa.

The target population number was two hundred (200) call centre employees. One of the authors being human resource practitioner at the selected organisation, the call centre group of employees have been observed taking high overtime and subsequent surge of unplanned absenteeism. Hence, this forms the quest to investigate the relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism. For this study, the probability sampling method was utilised and simple random sampling was selected as the best technique to select the sample. To calculate the required sample size, a formula provided by Yamane (1967) was used where a 95% confidence level and 5 sampling errors are assumed. The sample size for this study was determined to be 134 using the following formula:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e^2))$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population of the study

e = margin of error in the calculation.

In this specific case:

$$n = 200 / (1 + 200(0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 200 / (1 + 200(0.0025))$$

$$n = 200 / 1.5$$

$$n \approx 133,33,$$

Therefore, rounding off to the nearest whole number, n = 134.

The questionnaire was sent via participants' emails. Although an extensive follow-up was conducted without any direct influence and coercion, only 59 questionnaires were returned. Out of 59 questionnaires, 9 of them were discarded and many questions were not answered. Hence, returned usable responses considered were n= 50. The response rate is in line with Nulty (2008) who states that the expected general norm of questionnaires that are sent via online (emails) is between 20-47%. Therefore, the response rate of 44% found in this study was considered sufficient. For analysis of data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The regression analysis revealed that work life balance has a significant impact on employee absenteeism. Reliability of the research instrument was achieved in this research by ensuring that the data collected was systematically analysed using Cronbach's alpha. Data was collected using closed ended questionnaire, which was disseminated to all the call centre employees of leading electronic organisation in South Africa. The questionnaire was adapted from validated instrument of Alfatihah et al. (2021). Data was analysed using both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. For ethical considerations, the researcher ensured that personal or biographical details are not revealed in the process collection of data and interpretation of the results. The researcher obtained gatekeeper's letter and informed consent from participants (employees), and there were no incentives offered for their participation in this study. The research participants were given the right to withdraw from the process at any time and the researcher informed the participants of this right.

4. Results

Nulty (2008) who states that the expected general norm of questionnaires that are sent via online (emails) is between 20-47%. Due to the fact the questionnaires were sent via email, the response rate was 44% and considered sufficient. In terms of reliability, 'work life balance' scored 0.72, leave utilization scored 0.71 and absenteeism achieved 0.78. According to Treiman (2009), a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as highly acceptable. The values of Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient of the research variables of this study are greater than 0.7, which is equivalent to 70%. This indicates that the instrument used for the data collection for this study is deemed to be reliable. In terms demographic representations, the majority (56%) of the participants had between 26 to 35 years. In terms of gender, the majority (66%) of the participants were males. In relation to race, the majority (72%) of the participants were Africans. Regarding work experience,

the bulk of the participants (68%) had between 1-14 years of working experience. Almost half of the participants (48%) a matric certificate as their highest qualification.

4.1. Work life balance descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the mean values and distributions for the work-life balance variable in line with the second research objective of this study.

Table 1. Mean values for work-life balance

Constructs	Mean	Std. Deviation
Innovative work life balance policies are valuable to the wellbeing of the employee	3.94	.652
I am always in need of taking up overtime to meet my personal needs	4.04	.669
Work life balance improves physical and mental health	3.46	1.073
Work life balance helps with reducing job stress	3.60	.881
Work life balance has multiple benefits for employees	3.94	.652
Valid N (listwise)		

Source: Computation of data

In terms of Table 1, most respondents (mean score 3.94) felt that innovative work life balance policies are valuable to the wellbeing of the employee. The bulk of the respondents (mean score 4.04) indicated that they are always in need of taking overtime to meet their personal needs. This means the employees were not getting sufficient time to do their personal needs. A further reinforcement came from the responses evident in Table 1 which indicates that most of the respondents (mean score 3.46) were of the view that work life balance improves physical and mental health. A mean score of 3.60 indicates that respondents were confident that work life balance helps with reducing job stress. As illustrated in Table 1, a mean score of 3.94 reveals that respondents saw that work life balance has multiple benefits for employees. Overall, the responses indicated that the respondents feel that they need more time to cover for work aside the standard working hours.

4.2. Leave utilization descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the mean values and distributions for the leave utilization variable in line with the second research objective of this study.

A mean score of 4.03 in Table 2 shows that respondents could take leave as and when required. A mean score of 2.99 indicated that the respondents took a tentative position when asked about whether they totally switch off and not think about work during leave. A mean score of 3.58 shows that respondents agreed that in the past 3 months, they took planned (annual) leave of 7 - 10 consecutive days. A mean score of 2.66 shows that respondents took a tentative position when asked about whether they often feel well rested and

rejuvenated after their leave. The bulk of respondents (mean score 3.58) confirmed that they always look forward to returning to work after leave.

Table 2. Mean values for leave utilisation

Constructs	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can take leave as and when required	4.03	.669
During my leave I switch off and not think about work	2.68	.935
In the past 3 months I took planned (annual) leave of 7 - 10 consecutive days	3.58	.859
I often feel well rested and rejuvenated after my leave	2.66	.961
I always look forward to return to work after my leave	3.58	.859
Valid N (listwise)		

Source: Computation of data

4.3. Absenteeism descriptive statistics

Table 3 shows the mean values and distributions for the absenteeism variable in line with the second research objective of this study.

Table 3. Mean values for Absenteeism

Constructs	Mean	Std. Deviation
In the past 2 months I have taken more than 7 days of unplanned (sick) leave	3.80	.614
Absenteeism is increased by the lack of work life balance	3.90	.614
When I am on sick leave, I got anxious about piling up of my work	3.42	.928
I have depleted my 36 sick leave days in the current leave cycle	3.68	.713
My usage of leave has been highlighted by my manager as concerning	3.24	1.001
Valid N (listwise)		

Source: Computation of data

A mean score of 3.80 in Table 3 shows that respondents indicated that in the past 2 months they took more than 7 days of unplanned (sick) leave. A further confirmation came from a mean score of 3.90, respondents indicated that absenteeism is increased by the lack of work life balance. This indicates that the participants feel that their unavailability at work is mainly caused by lack of work life balance. A mean score of 3.42 depicts that respondents took a tentative position when they asked whether they are anxious about their work piling up when they are on sick leave. A mean score of 3.68 shows that respondents confirmed that they have depleted their 36 sick leave days in the current leave cycle. A mean score of 3.24 in Table 3 illustrates that respondents indicated that respondents took a tentative position when asked whether the usage of leave has

been a concern by their manager. The following section provides the inferential analysis of the data collected in this study. Hypotheses and predictions were measured using regression analysis and pearson correlation test. Linear regression analysis measured the relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism.

4.4. Pearson correlation test results

Table 4 shows the Pearson correlation results of each research variable of this study with significant correlation indicated by *.

Table 4. Pearson correlation test results

Constructs		WORK_LIFE_BALANCE	LEAVE_UTILIZATION	ABSENTEEISM
WORK_LIFE_BALANCE	Pearson Correlation	1	.218	.304*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.129	.032
	N	50	50	50
LEAVE_UTILIZATION	Pearson Correlation	.218	1	-.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.129		.586
	N	50	50	50
ABSENTEEISM	Pearson Correlation	.304*	-.079	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.586	
	N	50	50	50

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Computation of data

Table 4 shows that there is a substantiated correlation between work life balance and absenteeism. In other words, work-life balance affects employee absenteeism. According to Table 4, there was a positive correlation between the work life balance and absenteeism, as indicated by a correlation factor of 0.304. The association was proven to be statistically strong, as indicated by a significant value of 0.032 which is below the maximum pegged significant level of 0.05.

4.5. Regression analysis results

Linear Regression Analysis: Work life balance and Absenteeism

The study used linear regression analysis to determine the relationship of independent variable (work life balance) and dependent variable (absenteeism). Linear regression was computed using SPSS version 28. The inferential analysis answered the key research objective: to examine the impact of work life balance on employee absenteeism.

Table 5. Regression analysis results

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics		
					Change	F Change	df1
1	.338 ^a	.114	.077	2.017	.114	3.038	2

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	24.728	2	12.364	3.038	.047 ^b
	Residual	191.292	47	4.070		
	Total	216.020	49			

a. Dependent Variable: ABSENTEEISM

Source: Computation of data

As illustrated in Table 5, adjusted R² was 0.114 which means 11,4% absenteeism is contributed by poor work-life balance. Hence, there is a relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism. Table 5 also shows that work-life balance and leave utilization are significant predictors ($P < 0.05$) of employee absenteeism. The F-test was carried out to measure the impact of the independent variable (work-life balance) on the dependent variable (absenteeism). As shown in Table 5, the F-test outcome reveals that F-count value was 3.038 which outwit the minimum F-critical value of 2.51304. This indicates that work-life balance influences absenteeism.

5. Discussion

Regarding the first research objective, the findings indicated a relation between work-life balance and absenteeism. This means proper work life balance reduces absenteeism while poor work-life balance causes an increase of absenteeism rate among employees. In other words, there is an inverse relationship between work life balance and absenteeism. An ability of an employee to maintain work life balance impacts positively on his or her absenteeism from work. In other words, a good work life balance helps both the employee and the organisation in that the employee's wellbeing can be at its optimum, allowing the employee to report for duty as and when required to. The findings of the present study are in agreement with Larasati and Hasanati (2019) who carried out a study on the effects of work life balance towards employee engagement in millennial generation and found that work life balance had an impact on employee engagement. The findings also revealed that innovative work life balance policies are valuable to the wellbeing of the employee. The study aligns with Sidik (2019) who conducted a study on the effect of ability, work life balance, work satisfaction on performance of employees and revealed that work life balance had an effect on the performance of employees. The research results revealed that wellness, time and stress management, if not managed properly in relation to work life balance will result in increased absenteeism. The study concurs with Esguerra (2020) who carried a study on work-life balance and job stress of employees and found that work-life balance was found to be significantly correlated to the job stress. The results indicated that employees need time to meet their personal

needs. The findings indicated that work life balance improves physical and mental health. Similarly, the results are consistent with the Cvenkel (2021) who conducted a study on work life balance and well-being at work and organizational family-friendly work life balance initiatives that were found to help employee health and well-being. The results showed that employees feel that they need more time than just standard working hours to cover their work responsibilities.

5.1. Practical implications

The findings indicated that proper work life balance reduces absenteeism. Based on the research findings, there is a need for management to encourage employees to exercise work life balance in their day-to-day lives to alleviate stress related to family and burnout related to work which may be a fulcrum for absenteeism. The ability for the employee to strike the balance reduces the susceptibility for absenteeism, especially unplanned absenteeism. The managers should formulate proper leave plans, forced leave for those with high annual leave balances, stringent overtime uptake in line with the regulatory guidelines and rest periods. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997 stipulates the minimum conditions of employment. The management should ensure that the workforce planning team schedules for each employee do exceed more than 8 hours a day. They should not work more than 45 hours a week. Another aspect is that of overtime, where an employee takes overtime, a close monitoring should be instituted in which managers must ensure that no more than forty hours per month and ten hours in a day are worked. Leave analysis needs to be done regularly to ensure that at least 10 consecutive annual leave days are utilised and properly planned for. Hybrid work policy can be executed, in this case the employee can have a flexible work environment (having a choice to either work at the office or from home). Over and above, it would be beneficial for the organisation to have an employee assistance programme where employees can call and arrange facilitated professional sessions to resolve their work-related challenges.

5.2. Contribution of the study

Since no study has been conducted on this subject, this study is crucial to micro (departmental) and macro (organizational) levels because the findings found may be deployed to other businesses in call centres industry. The insights gained from this study equip line managers on how to identify signs of poor work life balance. The study provides guidance to the direct leaders on how to support their subordinates before absenteeism reaches high proportions. Theoretically, the study brought great understanding of the importance of having work life balance and how its poor monitoring may contribute to reduction of burnout and subsequently, absenteeism. The study extends the existing knowledge of work life balance and absenteeism, therefore make a notable contribution to the existing academic literature.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary research objective was addressed as the impact of work life balance on employee absenteeism was shown. The preceding sections have given an empirical analysis in line with the research topic which sought to assess the effects of work life balance on employee absenteeism. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between work life balance and absenteeism, such that lack of work life

balance increases absenteeism. In this instance, when there is a good balance in the interactions of work and life, the individual is less likely to be stressed, therefore cases for not reporting for duty can be reduced. This study also concluded that employees' leave utilisation increases work life balance. This means that the research objectives have been adequately addressed. This research paper is crucial and relevant as it assisted to pre-empt and address work-life balance as a cause of absenteeism. The main limitation of this study is that it focused on the call centre employees of one organisation only. This means that the results of this study cannot be deemed as a representation for any other organisation. A fruitful line of future research can investigate the relationship between work-life balance and absenteeism in more two organisations to check the probable differences and similarities.

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