

WLB (work life balance) and EE (employee engagement) at inflection point? Theorising the Contextual Dynamics in Crisis (COVID) perspective

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Abstract

The working employees in private sectors got affected significantly during the COVID pandemic of 2019-2020 due to a disguised double burden. It means, this situation has led women employees to struggle in maintaining the work both for office as well as home. The work from home concepts were something which the women employees dreamt off but now in the context of crisis (current COVID) the real time experience has made them feel drained out. When women employees are struggling with their work life balance (WLB), it might be a responsibility of employers to take care of the employee both mentally and physically. The employee engagement (EE) is the key for organisation's success hence deserve utmost importance especially in pandemic situation. Usually, any company needs employees' roles in shaping the company's vision and mission and in crisis it multiplies.

The current paper with a backdrop of crisis context (say COVID) tries to decompose sub-constructs of WLB and EE separately in terms of contextual dynamics and then find logical linkage between those through a theoretical synthesis. The disaggregation of characteristics of sub-construct identifies them as either individual or organisational or an intersection of both which then create the mechanism of linkage between WLB and EE to understand the possibility of an inflection point. The contextual identification of the sub-constructs mainly in crisis conditions will be very useful for designing specific and targeted interventions in (private) organisation set up mainly in crisis situation like COVID. This paper tries to provide new insight to larger body of knowledge and also pose more pertinent questions for further empirical research.

Key words: Constructs, Contexts, Crisis, Dynamics, Theoretical synthesis

1. The context

With changing situations such as LPG (liberalisation, privatisation and globalization), the industry ecology has gone through a sea change and one such visible transition is in the role of employees to accomplish their works relatively quicker without any flaw. It has been an accepted fact in the evolution of HRM (Human Resources Management) that employees form the back bone of any company. Because of this, companies need refinement in the role of each employees towards fulfilling the company's vision and mission.

In the intersection of company and employee needs, crisis situations like COVID or similar others make it important that the personal life of employee ought to be balanced. This is commonly known as Work-Life Balance (WLB). Often the WLB is described as an individual's perception and experience on work and personal life with consensually agreed priorities and considered appropriate for organizational growth. Work-related problems mostly emerge from workplaces with dense schedules such as poor time management, rigid work schedules and remote office location leading to job dissatisfactions, which are also reflected by experience of personal level problems. The imbalance between work and personal life may cause higher stress which in turn can lead to greater turnover intentions. Thus, better ability of employees to achieve WLB with company support lead to higher work engagement, greater commitment and better job performance.

In this continuum, another important concept, the 'Employee engagement' emerges as a significant contributor towards organization's success. The concept of employee engagement is built on important foundations of HRM such as job satisfaction, employee commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour. This is characterised by a well-defined workplace approach assuring right conditions for all members of an organisation required to yield their best results. This approach instils a sense of commitment among the employees towards achieving organisation's goals, elevated motivation to contribute towards organisational success and overall, an enhanced sense of personal well-being. Employee engagement as a construct touches most aspects of human resource management, when not addressed in appropriate manner particularly during crisis situations like COVID can lead to failure in organisation growth. This concept is usually applied in most companies today in work and life domains (Mos et al., 2018).

The umbilical relationship between work life balance and employee engagement is being continually investigated by scholars and thinkers in human resource research mainly in different organisation perspective, public or private. With fast-changing life-style and new norms preceded by crisis situations mainly, it is found that the factors such as appreciation, work environment and work-life balance can significantly influence employee engagement in corporate sector. These sort of budding enthusiasm among researchers in general situations, warrants a need for systematic inquiry on the magnitude of relationship between WLB and EE specially beyond general context rather in crisis situations like COVID and in private organisation context to find any meaningful inflection point and the phenomenon revolving around this.

2. Operationalization

Various theorists and researchers have presented different views on the concepts of WLB and EE separately and possible relationships between them in varying circumstances. Many of them try to disaggregate the sub-constructs within WLB while explaining their individual significance in HRM and possible impact on ecology of industries. Similarly, about the EE too, specific behaviours of employees have been examined by some researchers to explore their individual and joint effects on a company's success. There are some others who endeavoured to elucidate the process in which the WLB as a whole or some of its components influence the employee engagement or select sub constructs of the EE.

The operationalisation of the current paper follows a logical process toward developing a clear knowledge base about the WLB and EE and their relationships in these 5 steps:

- a) Undertake an intensive theoretical critique of the observations separately for EE and WLB
- b) Based on the critique a gap analysis will be carried out.
- c) This is followed by a decomposition the main construct of WLB and EE into sub-constructs.
- d) A synthetic theoretical model will be created out of the analytical understanding particularly thinking beyond general context rather in crisis situations like COVID and in private organisation context to unearth existence of any meaningful inflection point and the phenomenon revolving around this.
- e) Based on this theoretical understanding some very pertinent question that remains unanswered will be posed for further research.

Conceptual Critique of Work-Life Balance (WLB)

In the context of WLB, there are some research writings which seem to have either ill-defined the concept or explained few conditionality from the employee point of view only. Some visualise the WLB more of a family-friendly environment in workspace (Felstead et al. 2006) where as others list a number of situations such as Career Advancement, Work Stress, Career Aspiration, Work Family Conflict and Family Work Conflict, Child Care etc. while reporting the WLB (Sudha, 2014). There are yet other thinkers who claim that various role relationships form the basis of WLB such as multiple roles, equity across those roles, satisfaction between multiple roles, fulfilment of role, salience between multiple roles, relationship between conflict and facilitation, and perceived control between multiple roles (Brough, 2015).

There are researchers who presented insights on contextual effects of different factors on the WLB such as gender and culture among others. In term of culture, the WLB is perceived differently in western and eastern perspective. While American multinationals focused on flexible working practices, Indian companies mostly adopt employee welfare programmes. Often in Asian countries, gender socialization played a major role in shaping one's perception towards WLB whereas coping strategies are mainly individual driven (Chandra, 2012). A study on contrast between women and men's response in an UK hospitality industry found that for women employees, effective work- life balance initiatives have relatively higher effect on progress towards senior management. This is resonated by long hours associated with managerial roles being a significant barrier for women's career (Bloom, Kretschmer and Reenen, 2009). It is also visualised that better diversity management and voluntary approach to work- life balance may deliver positive benefits to women when the labour

market is tight. This hints towards possible interaction between productivity and work life balance. These observations imply that WLB measures may in turn influence workplace performance. So the firms with better skilled workforce are more likely to implement WLB- enhancing practices (ibid, 2009).

Conceptual Critique of Employee engagement (EE)

In the context of EE, different studies illustrate varying magnitude and type of engagement of a typical employee with the organisation. While explaining the concept of employee engagement, some studied emphasize the relevance of relatively personal level engagements whereas few researchers put more focus on organisation level engagement and yet others signify the role of both personal as well as organisational level engagement to be important.

The researchers who visualise EE largely as a personal trait, try to examine the philosophical meaning of engagement, for instance ‘one step up...’ from commitment (Robinson, 2004). In somewhat similar line of thought, other theorists (Macey and Schneider, 2008) create more than one categorisation like psychological, behavioural and train engagement adding a bit of ambiguity to the concept of EE. In contrast, there are other researchers who describe EE more of an organisational behaviour related to the role performance (Kahn, 1990; Markos and Sridevi, 2010). Kahn (1990) further disaggregates the concept of role performance into physical, cognitive and emotional aspects. While the cognitive aspect of employee engagement reflects employees’ beliefs about the organization, its leaders and working conditions, the physical aspect of employee engagement represents the physical energies exerted by individuals to accomplish their roles. The emotional aspect covers the feeling of employees and positive or negative attitudes toward the organization and its leaders. Emotional nature of EE has been theorised in further disaggregate way by some thinkers. They visualise that engaged employees are likely to be emotionally attached to their organization and highly involved in their job with a great enthusiasm for the success of their employer, even going extra miles beyond the employment contractual agreement (Markos and Sridevi, 2010).

There are some research works that try to find correlates of EE with or without a clear causal mechanism. The determinants or correlate of EE varied from ecological factors like working atmosphere (Anitha, 2014; Little, 2006) to inter-organisational communication (Kular et al. 2008), to nature of job and procedures associated with them in clear terms (Saks, 2006) within the organisation context. Yet other theories associated with organisational studies go beyond the organisation setting and find organizational resources, social resources, job resources, home resources and personal resources to be proximate determinates of EE (Lee, Rocco and Shuck, 2019).

3. Critical Gap Analysis

While most of the researchers have brought out important aspects of WLB and EE in their works to the general body of knowledge, there lies some critical issues that needs further attention.

- Often few studies present the issues in somewhat aggregate manner rather than micro-level illustrations. For instance, while defining the WLB some studies use personal issue like family care problems, but they do not disaggregate the latter in terms of the nature of those problems. The problems may be economic, social, physical or psychological in nature. From a program manager’s point of view, if the natures of the problems are identified clearly, specialised counselling or interventions can be designed.

- In contrast, in the case of EE, a good number of research works tried to disaggregate the problems to some extent but do not show any logical linkage in terms cause-effect relationship.
- Another gap emerges in terms of the inherent dynamics in WLB and EE perceptions with changing time. We all know with changing time and contexts certain relationship between factors of life might change. But in explaining WLB and EE, some researchers presented the issues in somewhat static manner and the future possible changes are missing.
- Micro level research disentangling complex web of relationships between WLB and EE for employees in crisis situations, say the current COVID contexts with new normal like WFH (work-from-home) still remains unearthed. As WHF style of work engagement is something that remained only in dreams, actual practice by women in particular have brought major chaos in life.

4. Theoretical Decomposition of the Constructs

It is clear that both WLB and EE are separate constructs and each encompasses combination of a number of processes rather than any single process. In order to understand these constructs separately and in holistic manner, it is necessary to decompose them into sub-constructs or variables and conduct disaggregate examinations over the sub-constructs. The following sections present different sub-constructs and variables in terms of their nature, level of operations and significance to WLB and EE. A close examination of the nature of the sub-constructs and the contexts of their operation, the current paper finds possibility of some sort of an identity dynamics to be in place.

5. Contextual Dynamics in WLB

Work-Life Balance refers to the varying prioritisation between personal and professional activities in an individual's life. The nature of those activities and magnitude of their effect on the job front can vary due to changing dynamics. Based on the contexts in which the variables might operate in influencing WLB can be presented in 3 types of dynamics although a thin line between the categories are not possible in practice. The dynamics may be operating largely at personal level or at organisational level or may be overlapping both personal as well as organisation similar to an 'intersection'.

- Individual Dynamics
- Organisational Dynamics
- Intersection of Individual and Organisational Dynamics.

WLB- Individual Dynamics

In the individual dynamics, the issues which are largely personal in nature are examined by this paper. In WLB context, the individual dynamics cover personal needs, social needs, career aspirations, child care and elder care, although this list may not be fully exhaustive and exclusive. Personal needs imply the needs of a person including, but not limited to, the need for food, clothing, shelter, health care and safety. These are the basic needs across all age groups hence can definitely influence the work life (so WLB) of employees. Social needs refer to the need to have relationships with others. It also shows the sense of belonging that a person needs. Career aspiration refers to a long-term career goal, plan, or dream that is far away in the future. Child and Elder care are yet another important sub factor for a working employee. If the care facilities are available for their child /elders, employees can give their

full potential to work without being worried and if it's not properly maintained there will a huge impact on the work life balance.

WLB- Organisational Dynamics

In the organisation dynamics, the aspect of life that are mainly influenced or designed by organisation are studied. In WLB context, they could be team work, supervisor support, multiple roles or type of employment so on. Employee tends to become collaborative and corporative based on their experience in the organisation or the industry. Teamwork is the collaborative effort of a group to achieve a common goal or to complete a task in the most effective and efficient way. Supervisor support is defined as the extent to which supervisor/ top management value their employees' contributions and care about their well-being. Supervisor support makes employees feel heard, valued and cared for. Multiple roles when properly delegated and their contribution considered valuable, employees feel the importance of work in organisation. Type of employment also brings a sense of belonging towards the organisation and it's the due responsibility of the organisation to take care of choice of work by the employees to possible extent. All these variables can ensure a better WLB condition.

WLB- Intersection of Individual and Organisational Dynamics

In the intersection of individual and organisation dynamics, comes the issues that traverse around personal as well as work place related aspects of life that influence WLB. Issues like Self-management, Time management, Compensation and benefits, Work management, Work family conflict and Working condition fall under this category. Self-management is the ability to prioritize goals, decide what must be done and being accountable to complete the necessary assignments. Good time management enables the employee to work smarter – not harder – so that s/he gets more works done in less time, even when time is tight and pressures are high. Better compensation and benefits with adequate experience can lead to high level of work satisfaction through enhanced level of motivation and performance. This means, higher the level of employee's compensation, better will be the job satisfaction.

Work management is also an intersection of individual and organisation as the work to be accomplished should be properly communicated among employees and superior to have a clarity. Work family conflict is yet another aspect as the person may feel immense pressure between work and family. Work-family conflict occurs when an individual experiences incompatible demands between work and family roles, causing difficulties in participation in both roles at a time. This imbalance creates conflict at the work-life interface. Working conditions refers to the working environment and aspects of an employee's terms and conditions of employment. This covers such matters as, the organisation of work and work activities; training, skills and employability; health, safety and well-being; and working time. A simple hygiene factor of proper lighting at workplace may have immense effect on the productivity of the employee.

6. Contextual Dynamics in EE

Employee engagement is a workplace approach ensuring the right conditions for all members of an organisation. This enables the employees to give their best each day, committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success parallel with an enhanced sense of

own well-being. Based on the level of association with organisation (personal and professional) and their effects on EE, following 3 types of dynamics are studied, again with the caution that a thin line between the categories are not purely possible.

- Individual Dynamics
- Organisational Dynamics
- Intersection of Individual and Organisational Dynamics.

EE- Individual Dynamics

In the individual dynamics, the issues which more or less operate at personal level thereby influencing the EE within an organisation. In EE context, they could be basic needs, individual engagement, growth, trait engagement and psychological state engagement. Basic needs include achieving a clarity on what works need to be completed and the employee has enough personal requirements to do their job at workplace. Individual in employee engagement means being an individual do you have the opportunity to do best and are you being recognised and gets enough care. Growth is yet another factor which includes individual development and progress in career parallel with opportunities to learn and grow.

Regarding trait engagement, some people have a more engaged predisposition when it comes to their work. All things being equal, they are naturally more engaged than others. The markings of individuals with high trait employee engagement include positive views of life and work. Psychological state engagement includes involvement, commitment, attachment, mood to do a particular task or work. Job satisfaction is defined as the extent to which an employee feels self-motivated, content & satisfied with his/ her job. Job satisfaction happens when an employee feels he or she is having job stability, career growth and a comfortable work life balance. The existence of these conditions can ensure a better EE situation.

EE- Organisational Dynamics

In the organisational dynamics of EE, those life practice that are principally influenced by organisational ecology are studied. In EE context, they could be team membership, work environment and organisation resources, company support and organisational engagement, again it may not be an exclusive list. Team membership in organisation answer the question of do I belong here? For an employee to be engaged one should check if the individual opinions count. Does the employee have enough clarity about the mission and purpose of the organisation to do their work? Work environment is also an important factor as a healthy work environment make the employee feel valued and hence engaged. A healthy workplace environment improves productivity and reduces costs related to absenteeism, turnover, workers' compensation, and medical claims.

Organisation resources includes all type of tangible and intangible assets that are available in the organisation and if the employee feel that they have adequate resource in performing a task then they will be more motivated in attaining the goal. Organisation engagement focuses on the relationship between the employee and the organization by conducting surveys, feedback, focus groups and development planning at a team or organization level. Assessment and analysis are completed to

identify perceptions and expectations of the employee with company support in order to fully engage the employee.

Intersection of Individual and Organisational Dynamics

In the intersection of individual and organisation dynamics, it be endeavoured to cover issue that traverse around personal as well as organisation aspect of life that are mainly influenced or designed by organisation. In EE context, issue covered here are the employee morale, employee flexibility, employee commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and job engagement. Employee morale is defined as the attitude, satisfaction and overall outlook of employee during their association with an organization or a business. An employee that is satisfied and motivated at workplace usually tend to have a higher morale than their counterparts. Employee flexibility in the workplace allows employers and employees to make arrangements about working conditions that suit both of them. This helps employees maintain a work / life balance and can help employers improve the productivity and efficiency of their business.

Employee Commitment is the bond the employees experience with their organisation. Broadly speaking, employee who are committed to their organisation generally feel a connection with their organisation, feel that they fit in and, feel they understand the goals of the organisation. Organisational citizenship behaviour is defined as helping behaviour that goes beyond the job description or task performance. This behaviour can be only seen if there is a positive relationship between employee and organisation. Job engagement can be defined as a person's enthusiasm and involvement in his or her job. People who are highly engaged in their job identify themselves personally with the job and are motivated by the work itself.

7. Theoretical Synthesis of Linkage between WLB and EE

As the contexts of WLB and EE share similar ecology covering the factors and processes, it is important to understand the type of linkage between those factors. There are studies which emphasize that in order for the employees achieving an acceptable balance between work and family lives, the employer ought to provide welfare programs and flexibility to the employees (Arif and Farooqi, 2014; Boorsma and Mitchell, 2011).

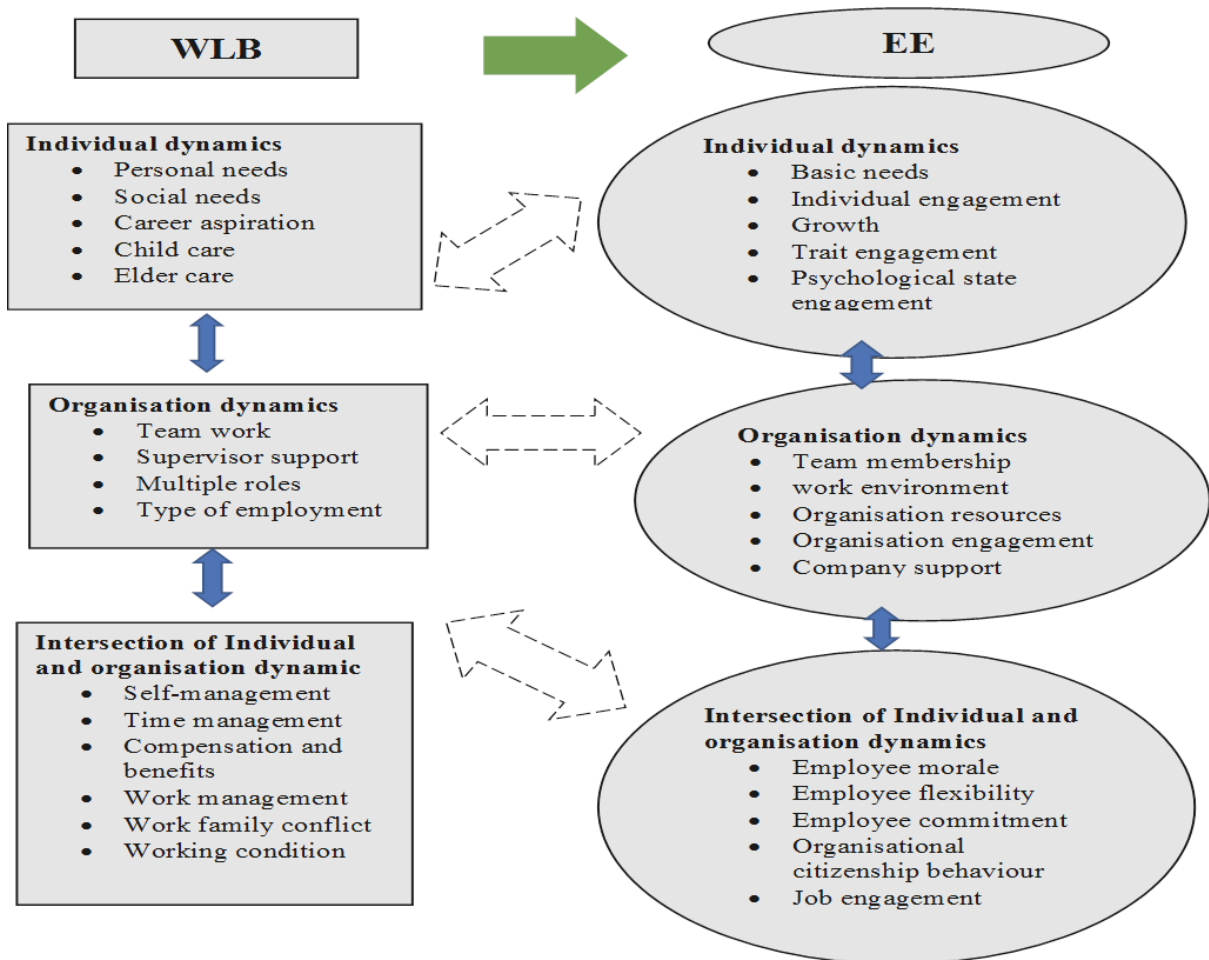
Some other research works present the linkage between WLB and EE in more disaggregate manner may be with direct or indirect associations. The supervisor support as WLB sub-construct is seen to have indirect link with turnover intentions aspects of EE. Additionally, employee engagement can have mediating causal relation with work interference with personal life and work–personal life enhancement aspects of WLB (Kaur and Randhawa, 2020). It is also perceived that employees' ability to achieve WLB with company support can lead to important sub-constructs of EE such as higher work engagement, greater commitment and better job performance (Rachmadini and Riyanto, 2020; Pandita and Singhal, 2017).

There is yet other research that go beyond conventional linkage between WLB and EE, rather they see an interactive effect of this linkage towards other aspects of organisational change. For instance, a study examines a holistic view of the link between WLB, job engagement and turnover intention (Jaharuddin and Zainol, 2019) and find that WLB and EE together may catalyse the potential for firm's continuous growth. Hence, imbalance between work and personal life may cause higher stress

leading to greater turnover intention among employees. Hence employees' ability to achieve WLB with organisational support should lead to higher job engagement, commitment and better job performance. External factor like change in micro-economy is sometimes seen to have influencing job satisfaction, employee engagement and satisfaction (Cahill et al. 2015). The state of the macro-economy can impact job satisfaction, employee engagement and satisfaction with work–life balance.

Based on these understanding the current paper develops a theoretical synthesis (Figure -1) to explain the linkage between WLB and EE in more flexible and open manner. This is shown in the diagrammatic framework. While the linkage between WLB and EE is shown with solid line the association between sub constructs are displayed by dotted lines. This is to prompt further research into disaggregate details in future.

Figure 1: Theoretical Synthesis of Linkage between WLB and EE



8. Conclusion and Pertinent Questions for further research

The study observes that work life balance and employee engagement have impact on each other. The work from home style as a result of crisis situation may pose much pressure for the employee mainly

for the women to handle both the office job and home. The women taking too much stress for those responsibility may be forced to forget about their own well-being. This situation mainly in crisis like COVID and in private organisations presents uncertainty without clear knowledge on when things are back to normal.

The detailed conceptual critique from various research works and examination of sub constructs of WLB and EE brought out a clear understanding that employees' ability to achieve work life balance with company support can lead to higher work engagement, greater commitment, and better job performance. It also became clear that work life balance is one of the important factors that influence employee involvement and vice-versa. Hence the components of WLB need to taken care by employers mainly in private organisations in order to achieve optimal EE.

However, the critical gap analysis of this paper identifies that still a number of pertinent questions remains unanswered and needs further research, such as:

- a) What is the empirical evidence from people experiencing WLB and EE in their practical life?
- b) What are the contexts mainly the crisis situation like COVID in which employees actually face accidental issues and how do they respond?
- c) What could be the non-linear phenomena existing in linkage between WLB and EE?
- d) What are the possible healthy coping mechanism that can help employees to have a better WLB?
- e) What support can be given by organisations for women facing such issues?
- f) What are the gender based issues relating to WLB which can impact EE?

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