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Abstract: In Australia like many other countries small firms make up the bulk of the business population. Hence, they play an important role in managing our intellectual and social capital. One specific role they play is how they assist their employees to manage the work-life interface. This paper provides a discussion of: (i) what is meant by the term work-life balance; (ii) why it is important for small firms to address this human resource management issue; (iii) what are the types of work-life balance practices available and the utilisation of them by employees; (iv) what problems / barriers maybe encountered in seeking to implement such practices and how such problems can be overcome; and (v) finally it offers a critique of the organisational predictors / determinants of firms offering such practices. This final aim of the paper will be supported with a proposed preliminary model of organisational predictors of small firms that offer work-life balance practices.

Purpose, Prevalence, Problems and Predictors of Work–Life Balance in Australian Small Business

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ABSTRACT   *In Australia like many other countries small firms make up the bulk of the business population. Hence, they play an important role in managing our intellectual and social capital. One specific role they play is how they assist their employees to manage the work-life interface. This paper provides a discussion of: (i) what is meant by the term work-life balance; (ii) why it is important for small firms to address this human resource management issue; (iii) what are the types of work-life balance practices available and the utilisation of them by employees; (iv) what problems / barriers maybe encountered in seeking to implement such practices and how such problems can be overcome; and (v) finally it offers a critique of the organisational predictors / determinants of firms offering such practices. This final aim of the paper will be supported with a proposed preliminary model of organisational predictors of small firms that offer work-life balance practices.*

'Work-life balance' is an important area of human resource management that is receiving increasing attention from government, researchers, management and employee representatives and the popular media (De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott & Pettit 2005). Guest (2001) suggests that work-life balance has come to the forefront in recent times largely because in western societies the excessive demands of work are perceived to present a distinctive issue that needs to be addressed. Many researchers (Baron,, Mittman & Newman 1991) have noted that responding to the challenges of the work–family relationship is a major challenge for organisations and is an area that has been under-researched.

Bardoel (2006) explains that given the changes in the way we work, work-life balance strategies need to evolve from simple reactive remedies which focus on individual problems to a focus on the socioeconomic environment of the workplace and the development of human resource strategies to attract and retain valued employees. Understanding what might be an appropriate approach can only be achieved via further public debate and policy making as well as making it a priority for human resource planning at the enterprise level.

This paper plans to assist in achieving this by examining the purpose, prevalence, problems and predictors associated with work-life balance practices, specifically in small firms. The paper provides a discussion of: (i) what is meant by the term work-life balance; (ii) why it is important for small firms to address this human resource management issue; (iii) what are the types of practices available and the utilisation of them by employees; (iv) what problems / barriers maybe encountered in implementing and how such problems can be overcome; and (v) finally it offers a critique of the organisational predictors / determinants of firms offering such practices. This final aim of the paper

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What is Work-Life Balance Really?

In the last decade there has been a significant change in attitude towards matters concerning work – life balance issues in Australia and in other advanced western market economies (Parliament of Australia 2006: 22-23). This barbeque stopper debate has been enlivened by arguments that the term work-life balance may be misleading for a number of reasons. The first issue is that the word 'balance' implies that the two parts should be equal like the scales of justice (Guest 2001; Edgar 2005). Guest (2001). Guest (2001) states that in simple terms "work" is normally conceived of as including only paid employment. Such issues have therefore resulted in different definitions being offered for the work-life balance. Essentially though work-life balance is "a self-defined, self-determined state of well being that a person can reach, or can set as a goal, that allows them to manage effectively multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in their community; it supports physical, emotional, family, and community health, and does so without grief, stress or negative impact" (Canadian Department of Labour, as cited in Bardoel 2006, p. 239).

Purpose: Why Should Small Business Care About Work-Life Balance?

In the last decade there has been a significant change in attitude towards matters concerning work-life balance issues in Australia and in other advanced western market economies (Bardoel 2003; Guest 2001; Hogarth, Hasluck, Pierre, Winterbotham & Vivian 2000). Guest (2001) identifies three broad sets of overlapping reasons for this. First are those developments that might be seen as causing the problem of work-life imbalance. For example the increasing intensity of work (based on time spent working at high speeds and to tight deadlines) (Allan, O'Donnell & Peetz 1999; Pocock 2003). Second, the consequences of work-life imbalance draw attention to it. For example due to an increase in the number of working hours employees are experiencing there is less time for "quality" family life. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) in 2004, 34.2 per cent of Australian men worked more than 45 hours per week. Third, are those influences concerning individuals and their lives that puts the challenge of work-life balance on the contemporary policy agenda. For example, given the arrival of Generation X and the so called decline in their desires to see work as a central life interest causes an alleged imbalance between work and the rest of life. Thus, there is an increasing need to consider appropriate policies to attract and retain such people (Muetzel 2003).

Similarly, Bardoel (2006) highlights three factors that have influenced work-life needs: (i) demographic factors that affect the labour force (for example, the significant increase in the participation of women in the workforce resulting in an increased need to balance work

responsibilities with life outside of work, such as caring and domestic duties); (ii) labour market trends and changing employment relationships (for example the increasing number of stressed people due to longer hours being worked and the intensity of the work); and (iii) the changes in societal values and attitudes (for example, men as well as women wanting to play a significant role in their children's development).

Hence, 'the work-life collision has important effects beyond how we feel: it affects vital economic and demographic trends' (Wolcott 1993). According to Campbell and Charlesworth (2004: 40) such a collision can affect the ability of workers and families to participate as fully as they might like in the workforce, which can have consequences such as increased rates of absenteeism, illness, reduced productivity and stress.

To respond successfully to these new labour force conditions there is a need for a change in mindset. Firms must move away from a focus on work-life issues that are reactive to individual concerns to a proactive, strategic approach supported by all stakeholders. This would ensure diverse contemporary issues are managed appropriately in an integrated manner that benefits all. The benefits to be derived for two of these major stakeholders, employees and employers, are numerous. The inclusion of benefits common to both allow for a greater chance of a company achieving improved performance and competitive advantage. Table 1 shows some of these benefits.. From a positive perspective, a recent Australian report on carer and family provisions in Australian small and medium enterprises noted that 80 per cent of those firms interviewed felt there were some benefits to offering carer and family provisions to their employees (Sensis 2007). For example 17% of firms, that were offering work-life balance provisions, experienced less staff turnover and 13% reported perceived increased productivity.

Further, specific reasons for why small businesses should be concerned include the fact that in light of decreased fertility rates and an ageing population firms will need to compete with each other to attract and retain quality staff (Wolcott 1993). They will not only be competing against themselves but also larger organisations. Hence, in order to keep up with big business they will need to offer similar attractive provisions. For example, according to the report, Better Conditions, Better Business (Sensis 2007), over one quarter of small and medium enterprises anticipated in early 2006 that skills shortages would impact on them in the near future. 57 % of those businesses stated that they would be willing to change their working arrangements to obtain or retain skilled workers. The same report tracks the

Table 1: Benefits of Work – Life Balance

Organisational	Individual
- reduced turnover - a positive impact on productivity - reduced absenteeism - increased return rate - a positive impact on client customer service - increase in employee motivation and satisfaction - assist in attracting staff - reduction in induction and training costs - reduces stress - compliance with legislative requirements - improved employee/employer relationship - look after employees and they look after you	- decreased work-life conflict which leads to: - decreased absenteeism - increased overall motivation and satisfaction - greater organisational commitment - increased productivity - decreased stress levels - a positive impact on client customer service - allows greater flexibility

Source: Dench, Bevan, Tamkin & Cummings 2000; Holmes 2005; Sensis 2007.

performance of Australian business every quarter. It reported that small and medium enterprises that offer their employees carer and family provisions compared to those that do not tended to report higher performance for most indicators including employment and also sales, profitability, capital expenditure, wages and prices. Small and medium enterprises that offer such provisions were more likely to export compared to those that did not (17 per cent compared to five percent). The report also found that capital expenditure was the only business performance indicator for which small and medium enterprises offering no provisions showed a higher level of performance. In addition, it was reported that small and medium enterprises which offered a larger amount of provisions (eight or more) to staff also reported significantly above average levels of performance.

Prevalence and Utilisation of Work-Life Balance Practices by Small Firms

There is vast array of work-life balance practices that a company can use to address work-life balance issues (Parliament of Australia, 2006). For example, Bardoel, Tharenou and Moss (1998) identified 100 different work-family practices based on previous studies. From this extensive list they developed 36 types of work-family policies by combining overlapping categories. This allowed grouping into five work-family categories which included child and dependant care benefits, flexible working conditions, leave options, information services and HRM policies, and organisational cultural issues. Similarly, McDonald, Brown and Bradley (2005) identify three major types of work-life balance policies as (i) flexible work options, (ii) specialized leave policies, and (iii) dependant care benefits.

The extent to which organisations as a whole adopt work-life balance practices varies. De Cieri et al. (2005) noting that of the three surveys they examined the most frequently cited work-life balance practices in order were part-time work, study leave, flexible starting and finishing times, working from home on an ad hoc basis and job sharing. These were similar to the findings of those practices specifically identified by Australian small and medium firms as provisions currently offered. The top four listed in this respective report were access to a telephone for family purposes, flexible annual leave, flexible start/finish times and part time work (Sensis 2007). Noteworthy, however, is that whilst work-life balance policies may exist the actual adoption of them by employees is not necessarily widespread (McDonald et al. 2005; Waters and Bardoel 2006) and often lags behind implementation. For example, De Cieri et al. (2005) found from their sample of respondents that only six per cent of organisations had more than 80 per cent of their employees using available work-life balance strategies within their organisations.

Problems Associated with Work–Life Balance Practices and How to Overcome These

Reasons for the lack of employee uptake of work-life balance policies may be attributed to recent empirical research findings (De Cieri et al. 2005) which demonstrated that some barriers can render the implementation of work-life balance practices ineffective. For example, barriers listed by De Cieri et al. (2005) include: an organisational culture which recognises and rewards long hours; an isolated, unfriendly and unaccommodating workplace for employees with commitments outside of work; a lack of supervisor and manager support; preference of management to recruit people perceived as alike to themselves; and a lack of communication and education about work-life balance strategies.

Similarly, Waters & Bardoel (2006) found six emerging themes for barriers to utilisation of work-family practices by employees. These included poor communication of policies, high workloads, career repercussions, management attitudes, influence of peers, and administrative processes. According to the *Better Conditions Better Business* report (Sensis, 2007), the main barrier to small and medium firms offering carer and family friendly provisions, from the employer's perspective, was the perceived loss of productive time and the associated increased costs. However, these were low in comparison to the reported perceived benefits.

According to the United Kingdom(UK) based Employers for Work-Life Balance (2005) small organisations face unique challenges such as time and cost constraints when introducing or improving work-life balance policies that large organisations may not encounter. For example, a small business owner may not be able to provide child care facilities or computerised facilities to work from home. In addition, Kreigler and Wooden (1990) note that the absence of one employee has a marginal effect on output in large organisations as opposed to small firms.

To overcome such barriers some general implementation guidelines have been postulated within the literature. These include: promote and appoint managers who advocate and practice flexibility; align work-life balance practices with business goals; ensure there is top management support; develop a multi-layered communication strategy; hold managers accountable for the success of the process; and ensure it is part of an integrated approach to managing work and the workforce in which formal measures of evaluation are implemented (CCH , 2006). Similarly, Kossek, Dass and DeMarr (1994) advocate that managerial attitudes to work-life balance strategies need to change if innovative and inclusive behaviours and organisational cultures are to be developed to address the changing needs of the current workforce.

Organisational Predictors of Small Firms Offering Work-Life Balance Practices

The research of many (see for example (Oliver 1991) suggest the prevalence of work-life practices being offered by businesses. However, little is known about the specific factors associated with the provision of such practices in small firms in Australia. According to Bardoel (2003, p.34) 'theory in this area has been rare'. Yet such information is important (i) for governments that wish to identify how they may better encourage and assist small businesses in offering work-life balance practices and (ii) for small business operators from a benchmarking perspective.

Recent research conducted by Sensis (2007) for the Australian Government's Office of Women did, however, reveal that: (i) from a size perspective when comparing small and medium enterprises, medium sized businesses (by way of the number of staff employed) were more likely to offer their employees carer and family friendly provisions; (ii) small businesses were more likely to offer certain provisions such as the ability to offer onsite child care; (iii) family businesses were slightly less likely to provide such provisions than were not-family based; (iv) generally home-based businesses were no more likely to offer such provisions than those businesses that operated from separate premises; (v) overall, if a small and medium enterprise was predominantly operated by female decision makers they were more likely to offer such provisions, which was followed by joint female and male decision makers; and (vi) small and medium enterprises with primarily female employees were far more likely to offer such provisions and reported the highest take-up rates by employees.

Similarly, research by Bardoel et al. (1998) indicated that larger organisations tended to adopt more work-family policies than smaller organisations and organisations with a perceived superior human resource management record were more likely to adopt flexible work options, individual growth opportunities and life career policies. However, in contrast to the Sensis (2007) above, Bardoel et al (1998) found that the greater the amount of women in the workforce was not associated with the adoption of work-family practices.

According to Wood (1999: 104) there are five key empirical papers on family-friendly management. Four are from the organisational adaptation perspective (Goodstein 1994, 1995; Ingram and Simons 1995; Morgan and Milliken 1992) and the fifth tests high commitment theory (Osterman 1995). Wood (1999) and Felstead et al. (2002) both test their hypotheses against four theoretical perspectives which attempt to explain the determinants related to the adoption of work-life practices. These are: (i) institutional theory; (ii) organisational adaptation theory; (iii) high commitment theory; and (iv) situational theory.

Towards a Model for the Analysis of Work-Life Balance Practices in Australian Small Firms
It is important to test if one of these four theories is more dominant than the other or if they are competing to assist in policy making both at the government and enterprise level. Wood (1999) and Felstead et al. (2002) found the four theories to be competing. However, Bardoel (2003) found support for integrating several theoretical perspectives (not specifically the exact four theories identified above, but rather institutional, resource dependant and managerial, thus similarities between the theoretical explanations can be drawn), to help explain the provision of work-family policies and an accommodating work-family workplace. Each of the studies was limited. For example, Felstead et al. (2000) only tested the four theoretical perspectives against one specific work-life balance practice (work at home). Wood's (1999) sample only consisted of establishments with 50 or more employees. Bardoel's (2003) study was limited by the number of factors tested. Hence, more empirical research is required.

A preliminary model as a basis for discussion is set out in Figure 1. Like Wood (1999) and Felstead et al. (2002) the model accepts that the differences between the theories of work-life balance revolve around the predictive characteristics that they identify. Hence, it is postulated that if certain organisation predictors (independent variables), such as business size, are associated with a small business the business is more likely to offer work-life balance provisions (dependent variables), such as flexible start and finish times. Arguably, integrating all four theoretical explanations would provide a more comprehensive approach into explaining the provision of work-life balance practices of small firms than either of them alone, as Bardoel (2002) found. The following discussion outlines each of the theories and the proposed associated organisational predictors in more detail.

Figure 1: Organisational Predictor Model of Work-Life Balance Practices
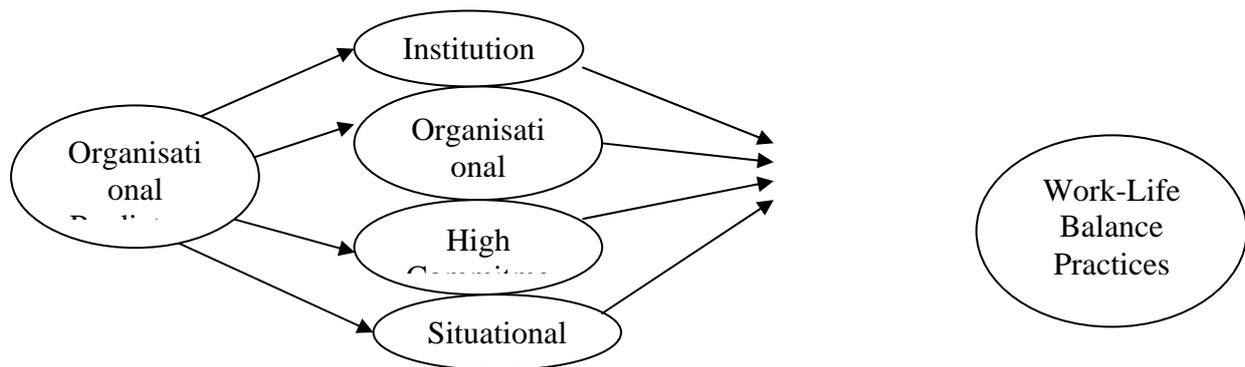
Institutional theory

Institutional theory is built around the rationale that organisations will conform to normative pressures faced within society. However, the adoption will vary in degree based on social legitimacy (Oliver 1991). For example, in relation to work-life balance practices it is assumed that private large sized firms and public sector organisations will be faced with greater pressure to conform due to their visibility and/or need to because of what they expect to gain in return (Bardoel 2003; Bardoel et al. 1998; Felstead et al. 2002; Goodstein 1994; Oliver 1991; Wood 1999).

However, given certain competitive pressures faced within industries, it has been argued that there maybe more pressure to provide work-life balance practices (Wood 1999) in a small business as failure to do so could damage their reputation with various stakeholders and hinder recruitment (Morgan and Milliken 1992; Goodstein 1994; McKee et al. 2000). Based on this argument of conformity and social legitimacy, organisations that have union presence may feel that they have to adopt work-life balance practices. But as outlined by Felstead et al. (2002) it could be argued that the unions mere presence could force inflexibility that would hamper pressures to conform.

Hence, it is postulated, that an institutional perspective on work-life balance theory may be characterised by factors such as (a) size of the business, by way of staff numbers (Bardoel 2003; Bardoel et al. 1998; Goodstein 1994; Felstead 2002; McKee et al. 2000; Morgan and Milliken 1992; Sensis 2007; Wood 1999); (b) the intention to increase the size of the business, by way of increasing staff employed (Morgan and Milliken 1992); (c) the length of time a business has been in operation (Osterman 1995); (d) location of the business; (e) industry type (Bardoel et al. 1998; Goodstein 1994; Ingram and Simons 1995; Morgan and Milliken 1992); (f) unionisation of the workplace (Morgan and Milliken 1992; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999); and (g) the existence of registered employment contracts (Osterman 1995; Wood 1999).

Organisational adaptation theory

This framework retains the above predictors / factors associated with institutional theory, but adds others that relate to the processes through which the organisation recognises and interprets the changing world around it (Felstead et al. 2002; Wood, 1999). Much of the recent research in the field has adopted this perspective (Morgan and Milliken 1992; Goodstein 1994; Ingram and Simons 1995). The additional factors associated with this theory are said to include management values toward work-life balance issues, the demography of the workforce and the perceived outcomes associated with the provision of work-life balance practices (Felstead et al. 2002; Wood 1999).

This theory therefore suggests from the work-life balance perspective that the greater the female composition of the workforce (given women may make the strongest demands for work-life balance practices) the greater the likelihood of work-life balance practices being offered (Felstead et al. 2002). Other features that may serve to make organisations conform to societal pressures could include how skilled and mobile the workforce maybe, which is associated with professional and managerial employees (see for example Felstead et al. 2002; Goodstein 1995; Wood 1999).

It is also expected from this theory that there is a greater chance that work-life balance practices will be offered from employers who value a healthy work-life balance, consult with their employees, who associate tangible benefits from the provision of these practices, who perceive the intensity of human resource issues with personal/family issues and who adopt a high-quality competitive strategy (Goodstein 1995; Felstead et al. 2002; Morgan and Milliken 1992; Wood 1999).

Hence, it is proposed that an organisational adaptation perspective on work-life balance theory may be characterised by the following factors: (a) the amount of consultation that takes place with its employees (Wood 1999); (b) the presence of a human resource manager/department (Bardoel et al. 1998; Goodstein 1994; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999); (c) the intensity of human resource problems associated with work-life balance issues (Bardoel et al. 1998; Bardoel 2002; Goodstein 1994, 1995; Felstead et al. 2002; Ingram and Simons 1995; Morgan and Milliken 1992; Wood 1999); (d) the education levels of its employees (Wood 1999); (e) the degree of professional staff employed (Felstead et al. 2002; Goodstein 1995; Wood 1999); (f) the degree of transferability of skills (Felstead et al. 2002; Wood 1999); (g) the amount of core versus peripheral staff (Wood 1999); (h) the gender composition of the workforce (Bardoel et al. 1998; Bardoel 2002; Goodstein 1994, 1995; Felstead et al. 2002; Ingram and Simons 1995; Morgan and Milliken 1992; Wood 1999); (i) the age composition of the workforce (Bardoel et al. 1998; Goodstein 1995; (j) the perceived benefits work-life balance practices bring to the workplace (Bardoel 2002; Goodstein 1994, 1995; Felstead et al. 2002; Ingram

and Simons 1995; Morgan and Milliken 1992; Wood 1999); and (k) the adoption of high quality competitive strategies (Wood 1999).

High commitment theory

This frameworks perspective suggests that there is a link between an organisation's HR strategy and its adoption of work-life balance practices (Felstead et al. 2002; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999). According to Felstead et al. (2002) the theory originates from an interest in work systems and employee–employer relationships that aim to raise employees' organisational commitment. Bardoel (2002) also found support for a link between managerial support and high performance work systems. However, the link was more related to an accommodating work-family workplace than the provision of formal work-family practices.

Hence, it is proposed that a high commitment perspective on work-life balance theory may be characterised by the owner/operator support for high performance work practices (Bardoel 2002; Felstead et al. 2002; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999).

Situational theory

Situational theory as referred to by Wood (1999) and Felstead et al. (2002) or practical response theory as referred to by Osterman (1995) takes a very pragmatic approach to the organisational adaptation theory. It implies that any management of work-life balance practices is done from an open, empirical question perspective. So the local circumstances are taken into account as opposed to the societal normative pressures when adopting work-life balance practices. Hence, an unsystematic / ad hoc / piecemeal approach may be adopted if this met the workforce requirements. This could mean that a reasoned approach could be applied if it was felt that there could be economic gains to be received if it met the greater workforce requirements.

Thus, it is proposed that a situation focused perspective on work-life balance theory may be characterised by the following factors: (a) the owner/operator support for managing the work-life interface (Felstead et al. 2002; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999); and (b) the recruitment difficulties, high rates of absenteeism and staff turnover (Felstead et al, 2002; Osterman 1995; Wood 1999).

Further Research

The preliminary model outlined above requires empirical testing. This future planned research will contribute to theory in four ways. First, it will apply four theoretical work-life balance models, not previously undertaken in Australia. Second, it will identify and test a comprehensive list of factors that represent each of the four theoretical models. Third, it will apply the concept solely to the small

business sector, which has not previously been undertaken. Finally; it will employ structural equation modeling, complemented with in-depth interviews of small business owner /operators, not previously undertaken in work-life balance research to the author's knowledge.

Conclusion

Small businesses can play an important role in managing our intellectual and social capital. One way they can do this is through adopting work-life practices that assist their employees in finding a suitable balance in managing their often conflicting roles. By offering a range of practices a small business is more likely to reap benefits such as reduced turnover and lowered absenteeism. Whilst the costs of offering some practices may deter some, small business can adopt practices that may cost relatively little such as the allowing employees access to a work phone for family reasons or bringing a child / parent to work in the event of an emergency. The ability to offer such flexibility is increasingly important in the current tight labour market if the small business wishes to compete in the global market. Further research however is still needed to identify the organisational predictors / determinants of firms offering such practices so that government can be made more aware of the assistance that small business may need to help redress social and economic exclusion for a number of workers, owners and operators given the extent of the business population they comprise. A preliminary model has been outlined which argues for the integration of four theoretical perspectives, with respective factors identified, for better explaining the provision of work-life balance practices in small firms.

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