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Book Review

Navigating Work and Life Boundaries – Insights for Distributed Knowledge Professionals
(Sarker *et al.*, 2021)

Palgrave MacMillan

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Review by Lucinda Soon

PhD Candidate at Birkbeck, University of London, Department of Organisational Psychology

The concept of balancing work and life has become an important lens through which to understand employee well-being. As the authors to this book convey in the introduction to chapter 1, work-life balance (WLB) has increased significantly in popularity in both academic and industry circles, and this has largely been influenced by the incessant blurring of the boundaries between work and life in contemporary societies. Indeed, this book is well-timed as knowledge workers reflect on their own experiences of working through a global pandemic, during which many will have endured varying degrees of enhanced work-life conflict (WLC). As its title suggests, this book is aimed at distributed knowledge professionals, specifically those working in the IT sector; however, as a non-IT professional reader I found the insights equally relatable to other sectors where knowledge work prevails.

The book comprises 6 chapters, which follow a logical order starting with a discussion of what WLB is, and the different theories which have been applied to the concept. This is followed by evidence from the authors' research that provides new perspectives into the organisational-level antecedents and consequences of WLC, particularly in relation to IT workers. The individual factors that are relevant for these professionals are discussed next, such as differences in personal lives (e.g. relationship status and family circumstances) and role-type (i.e. whether one works in a technical or managerial role). The focus here is on how WLC can manifest in different ways and to different degrees depending on a variety of individual characteristics. The book then moves on to discuss the impact of mobile technologies on WLC, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has made work-life challenges a major concern for all knowledge workers.

Before delving deeper into each chapter, it is worth mentioning that the book draws extensively on the authors' empirical research, comprising both qualitative and quantitative data. Thus, not only do the chapters take the reader through a range of significant topics, they also represent a compilation of studies the authors have undertaken over a period of time. To this end, methodological overviews for each of the studies are helpfully included as Appendices to the book, along with a detailed overview of the authors' literature review on WLB/WLC.

Chapter 1 provides a useful overview of WLB. It also introduces the authors' empirical research, drawing in the first instance on their qualitative data from interviews with IT workers, managers, and consultants around the globe, and the different perspectives on "balance" they identified. Of particular interest is, while some interviewees viewed balance as an act of maintaining separation between work and life domains, others saw it as a state of integration between the domains. Balance was also viewed by some as a compromise between work and life. Importantly, one perspective is not suggested to be more dominant than another. The

authors then offer a summary of the common theoretical models and approaches to managing WLB, such as the spill-over model, compensation model, and conflict model. A comprehensive and persuasive synopsis of Border Theory is then presented as an alternative, and less well-recognised, approach to understanding the antecedents and consequences of WLB (or conversely WLC). Acknowledging that this relatively new theoretical perspective is gaining traction among WLB/WLC researchers, the authors explain how work and life may be viewed as different “domains”, with each having “borders” furnished with “border crossings”, which “border crossers” – the workers in the analogy – are constantly negotiating and travelling across.

In chapter 2, the authors move on to contextualise Border Theory in relation to their primary worker population of interest, namely IT software developers working in globally distributed settings. After reviewing the existing literature (detailed in an Appendix to the book), the authors observe that there is limited research into WLC experienced by these workers and the unique conditions they operate within. In particular, the authors note that few existing studies have applied a Border Theory perspective, of which none were empirically based, with most studies focusing on the individual characteristics of the border crosser (the worker) rather than organisational-level factors, such as the role of the “border keeper” (the supervisor and organisational policies) or the work domain itself. Applying a Border Theory perspective, the authors present a series of variables of interest and related hypotheses, each informed by the existing literature and their analysis of interview data previously obtained on IT professionals working in globally distributed settings in Europe, India, and the United States. The potential adverse effects of 10 organisational variables on WLB are investigated, including the degree of temporal and physical borders, flexibility of work schedules, and the presence of supportive supervisors. A brief overview of the research methods adopted for the study are set out, with more detailed explanations easily being found in an Appendix. The findings of the survey data are then presented, followed by a set of clear guidelines which organisational managers will find helpful to consider in practice.

Chapter 3 then considers the individual characteristics of IT professionals undertaking globally distributed work, and how such factors might impact their experiences of WLC. Turning the focus from the organisational level to the individual border crosser, the authors outline key influencing characteristics which, like the organisational variables of interest set out in chapter 2, are developed from themes elicited from their previously gathered interview data, and their review of the existing literature. These individual factors, which include gender, relationship status, caregiving role, and national context among others, are set out in turn and their expected effects on WLC are presented as individual hypotheses. These are then tested using data drawn from the survey discussed in chapter 2. Hypotheses that were supported, (for example, that caregiving status had a significant effect on WLC) are equally interesting to note alongside those that were not supported, such as the role of gender on WLC, with the authors’ potential explanations for these findings offering an insightful read. The chapter concludes with implications based on the findings presented, and another set of useful guidelines for organisations to consider.

Chapter 4 centres around an in-depth case study constructed using longitudinal qualitative data, into a global company (pseudonym GLOBCOM) as it initiates, and transitions through, an offshoring insourcing restructuring of one its divisions. Offshoring insourcing, I was intrigued to learn, describes the situation when an organisation establishes a division

“offshore” from its home (onshore) country to reduce the workload of its onshore office, and does this by insourcing employees to work in the offshore site. This is contrasted with offshoring outsourcing, where the offshore company and its employees are separate from the onshore organisation, its resources, and culture. This study is fascinating not only because it offers the reader a greater understanding of the fluctuating work context experienced by software developers exposed to such an organisational endeavour, but importantly because it highlights the changing nuances and consequences of WLC observed through the different stages of the restructuring. A unique contribution made by this study is the investigation into the WLB/WLC experiences of IT workers in offshoring projects, whereas previous studies have focused on the offshoring phenomenon from a business risk and economic cost perspective. The authors outline a series of temporally situated stages of an IT offshoring insourcing initiative: initiation, distribution, delegation, and separation. The authors helpfully present the WLC issues prevalent at each stage and discuss how these change along the life course of the project. Data from the case study are weaved into the discussion at relevant points, and the chapter concludes with an insightful overview tying together the key WLC issues associated with each stage, for both onshore and offshore employees.

Chapter 5 moves on to explore the effects of personal mobile technology use on WLC. While this chapter primarily focuses on the use of mobile technologies by IT professionals, many of the insights shared may be relevant to knowledge workers more widely. In the first section of the chapter, the authors present results from their survey data which support an association between higher mobile technology use and WLC, and the contextual nuances that arise. A qualitative analysis is then entered, adding depth of insight to the survey findings. Themes developed from the authors’ interview data are presented, which unearth how and why greater mobile technology use might contribute to knowledge workers’ WLC in a variety of ways. The chapter then introduces and elaborates upon a new conceptual framework developed by the authors to explain three different perspectives or ideologies that knowledge workers hold about the relationship between their work and life domains. These comprise the compartmentalized, overlapping, and encompassing perspectives, and each are explained with reference to the different mobile technology use patterns which might accompany them. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive discussion of several strategies that organisations can adopt to manage WLC, depending on their employees’ different work-life perspectives and mobile use patterns. Some broad guidelines for managing a mobile workforce are also provided.

The final chapter of the book begins by providing a useful integrative summary of the previous chapters, joining together all the research findings discussed, and presenting a much-needed holistic overview of the insights developed. Any book on WLB or WLC published at this time would of course be incomplete without a discussion about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the authors present a thoughtful and thought-provoking dialogue about this. The way this is done is particularly illuminating, using a fictional case study of a work-family life situation pre-COVID and then picking out the various changes in contexts introduced by the COVID-19 crisis, and its implications on WLC levels. Returning to the theoretical perspective adopted in the book, that of Border Theory, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how a new “participative approach to border management” can aid and progress our understanding of WLC and help organisations and managers address these challenges in practice.

This book excels on many counts. It is clearly written, easy to follow, and the chapters are structured well. The insights developed are convincingly woven together, with each thread supported by findings drawn from the authors' studies. In my view, the book is particularly valuable in highlighting the nuances of context that knowledge workers experience between work and life, and the importance of acknowledging this complexity in future research and practice. In doing so, it makes a compelling case for a renewed approach to understanding WLC issues. This has come at a pivotal time when the world of knowledge work begins to process and reflect on the impact of COVID-19 and envisage more hybrid ways of working. Importantly, while the studies underpinning this book focus on the WLC challenges of IT professionals working in globally distributed settings, I did not feel it was exclusively relevant for this audience. Indeed, the contemporary world of work in which many knowledge workers find themselves has much in common with the contextual elements described, particularly the shift towards globally distributed work and increased technological dependence. From my own experience, as a lawyer, I found it easy to translate the authors' discussions to the work-life challenges facing the legal profession. I would imagine knowledge workers and their organisations in many other sectors will agree and find this book equally enlightening.