

Disability And Work-Life Balance: A Case Study Of ABC University

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the use of work-life balance practices by disabled and non-disabled employees in a higher education workplace. It aims to identify the reality of work-life balance in an organisational context which should promote equal opportunities by law, as stated in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Several conclusions can be made. The study finds that there is no significant difference in the take up rates of work-life balance practices between disabled and non-disabled employees. Moreover, this study did not find any gender differences within the disabled employees in the use of flexible arrangement but it is evident that the use of these practices is mainly linked with the occupation, suggesting that academics are more likely to use such practices than employees in administrative posts. Reasons for not using flexible working arrangements were similar between disabled and non-disabled employees and consist of organisational culture, the role of line managers and employee's awareness. However, business case was proven to be the most significant barrier for the introduction of such practices and their use by employees of both disabled status.

KEYWORDS: work-life balance practices, disabled employees.

1. DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Disability issues are a priority in the policy agendas over the past years as disability groups gradually have the power to influence traditional definitions of disability [37] and legislation has tried to provide disabled people with more opportunities in employment (Disability Rights Commission, 2008). Concerns about the social and political dimensions of disablement have intensified. The exclusion of disabled people from social and economic life is the subject of growing political protest and a major issue for politicians who have introduced some form of legislative framework to fight discrimination on the grounds of disability [8].

On the other hand, disabled people are still in the same disadvantaged position in the labour market as they were almost ten years ago [31]. According to Smith and Twomey (2002), supply as well as demand factors explain the poor position of people with disabilities in the labour market. The severity of the disability is one of the important factors in the ability of people to offer their labour. Other factors can be age, socio-demographic characteristics and level of qualification may explain further why disabled people face lower employment and higher chances of living in households with relatively lower income than the non-disabled population.

Many researchers have identified the low participation of disabled people in employment [37]. According to Smith and Twomey (2002), 31.4 million disabled people were in employment in autumn 2001, which corresponds to an employment rate of 48% compare to 81% for people without disabilities. On the other hand, when disabled people do find work they are over-represented in 'poorly- paid, low- skilled and low status jobs which are both unrewarding and undemanding', a type of work known as underemployment [5]. The majority of the disabled population works in administrative and secretarial jobs while there are considerably few disabled people amongst managers and professionals. Out of the working disabled population, 12% were managers and 15% in lower-level occupations compared with 14% and 12% relatively for the total employed population in UK.

Moreover, inequalities can be observed in the level of qualification suggesting that disabled people might have unequal starting points in their employment and therefore unequal employment outcomes. This is usually because the special education attended by disabled people has often under-equipped disabled people for the contemporary job market [11]. Disabled people of working age are twice as likely as the non-disabled people to not have qualifications while the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled gets smaller among those with higher level of qualifications [53].

Based on disabled people's experiences, employing organisations seem hostile to them, with a substantial proportion of disabled people believing that attitudinal barriers make it almost impossible for them to find employment [47]. Organisational culture sets an important aspect for the employment of disabled people since individual attitudes towards disability result in many myths and stereotypes which prevent disabled people from being employed. Many of these perceived difficulties expose stereotypical beliefs about disability- for example disabled people are considered to be only the wheelchair users. However, disability can be invisible and employees may prefer not to reveal it fearing any negative attitudes and behaviours [47].

The employers' attitudes towards disability constitute the most important barrier for employment of disabled people [52]. Employers play several roles by establishing the working conditions and firm policies and practices which determine the employment prospects of the disabled population. However, while it is clear that the employer's attitudes are crucial for the employment of disabled people, strong initiatives which work towards the change of these attitudes do not seem to exist. The most common is for the employers to feel that disabled people will not be good for the business or they are sceptical about the image that they will bring in the company [11]. Thus, employers' decisions are mainly determined by economic considerations [52] neglecting the personal need of the disabled population who want to participate in employment on more equal footing.

2. DISABLED EMPLOYEES AND THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE PRACTICES

Work-Life Balance policies and practices have attracted a great deal of attention from employers as, over the past twenty years, organisations have experienced changes in the nature of their workforce and an increasing demand by their employees to balance work demands and family responsibilities [44]. These are policies concerned with employees' hours of work (job-sharing, part-time, flexitime), leave entitlements (parental leave, career break), location of work (workplace or home), financial assistance (childcare, maternity leave) and particular responsibilities for elder care or children [48] aiming to offer a better balance between work and life demands.

Employers from their side have also found that the introduction of these practices offers them significant benefits such as raised morale, motivation and commitment, reduced absenteeism and improved recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce [13]. However, their introduction is not linked with the employability of disabled people. Employers, usually, have stereotypes about disabled employees, the main misconception being that they will have higher sickness and absence rates; they will be less productive and will be more expensive to employ [26].

The current dominant UK approach to equality promotes and supports an equal treatment principle, which is turned into workplace policies and practices that describe how individuals can be all treated the 'same' in spite of their differences [29]. The strategy of managing diversity welcomes the individual difference [28] and emphasises the need to move away from a collective identity towards a more individualised approach. Initiatives like work-life balance practices have become popular, expounding the idea of equity and diversity in the workplace while this new approach may contain implications for the workplace practices in relation to all disadvantaged groups, especially the disabled population [62].

Disabled people are a group of employees who appears to benefit from work-life balance practices as they want to participate in employment on an equal footing to the non-disabled people [11]. There exist several disabled people who do not wish to work full time or in traditional workplaces and they express the view that they have the right to work in a flexible job market, where flexible practices such as part-time and home-based work are at their disposal [11]. However, that 'new' labour market which is open to all is still far from being achieved [11].

3. WORK-LIFE BALANCE PRACTICES TAKE-UP

Even though evidence suggests that nowadays some employers offer a wide range of work-life balance practices to their employees, the actual take up rate of them by employees is not very high [33]. This phenomenon is attributed to several reasons such as perception that flexible working is still a women's issue [46], existing organisational culture and managers' attitudes [12], lack of understanding by the employees on what it is available to them personally [10] and introduction of flexibility based on business needs and not on those of the employees [16]. However, the justification of a business case for the disabled working population is hard to exist, compared to other minority groups. The reason is that disabled people are

very diverse when it comes to their personal needs while it is difficult to suggest that disabled people have universal abilities which can promote their employability [62].

4. THE 2000 BASELINE STUDY

The 2000 Baseline study (as analyzed by Hogarth et al., 2000), **is the only research which actually explores the take up of work-life balance practices by employees with disabilities.** The results show that the proportion of female employees working part-time was significantly higher than men and the sectors where they were mainly employed were manufacturing, mining and agriculture and education, in low-skilled and low-status jobs. According to the research, two thirds of the disabled employees worked part-time; around 25 per cent used flexitime while annualised hours and job shares were the least frequent practices taken up by this group of employees.

Moreover, 34 per cent of people with disabilities perceived these working arrangements as unfair to them compared to a 25 per cent of non-disabled employees. These results indicate that, although policies regarding work-life balance are welcomed by disabled employees, the actual practices in the workplaces do not seem to match their expectations. People with disabilities experience serious limitations in their everyday lives. As a consequence, they are in need of practices which facilitate a balance between work demands and life responsibilities. Therefore, their perception of the practices as being unfair seems bizarre.

This paper sets out to examine the use of work-life balance policies in practice in a university using semi-structure interviews with two groups of employees: disabled and non- disabled employees. The aim is to explore the differences between these two distinct groups of employees regarding the actual take up rates and their views towards their availability within an organisational context. Examining such an issue will shed light on the sensitive issue of disability in a working environment where equal opportunities for disabled employees should be promoted by law.

The research questions may be categorized as thus:

1. Are there any differences between disabled and non-disabled employees in the use of work-life balance practices?
2. Are there any gender differences in the use of work-life balance practices among disabled employees?
3. Why do employees with disability make more or less use of the work- life balance practices?

The research has been conducted in a single organisation, University of ABC. The aim is to identify the availability of these practices in a workplace where disabled people are being treated equally by law, as stated in the university's Disability Policy for Staff and Students⁵⁴ and the perceived accessibility by the employees. The University employs around five thousand people, from whom, a percentage of 1.9% has declared disability (80-90 employees). Based on its Equality and Diversity Recruitment Data Monitoring Report 2005/2006, the University's success rates of applicants by disabled status indicates that the percentage of the disabled candidates employed was the same as the non-disabled ones (5%). However, there exist a number of employees (6%) whose disabled status is unknown⁵⁴.

5. METHODOLOGY

For this project, the researcher employed qualitative research methods which emphasize an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research while focusing on the way in which individuals interpret social world [9].

For the collection of the data, the researcher used semi- structured interviews with disabled and non- disabled employees supplemented with documentary analysis. Interviews, in general, and for this project, in particular, deal with sensitive issues where trust is involved [22] and thus they were considered the most appropriate method for the topic of disability.

The documents used for the purposes of the research included the Flexible Working Guidelines and the flexible working definitions, the university's Equality and Diversity Policy, the Disability Policy for Staff and Students and the Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan for 2006-2009. The examination of these documents aimed to establish the university's attitudes and the appropriate action taken towards the issues of work-life balance and disability.

Given the sensitive nature of the issue of disability explored in this project, it was not possible for the researcher to contact disabled employees in person. When the HR department was asked to intermediate and recommend people with some kind of disability for the purposes of the interviews, the answer was that this was not possible based on the Data Protection Act 1998 according to which the university cannot reveal the physical or mental health of the employees [54]. Moreover, they mentioned that it was not easy for them to approach the disabled employees since many of them are not comfortable discussing this issue with the management and it might also affect the already small number of those who choose to declare it to their managers. However, an alternative solution was proposed. The researcher was advised to contact the Equality and Diversity Representatives listed on the university's website. The intention behind the creation of this

group is to get equal opportunities representatives from each department who will encourage communication between the departments and the centre concerning Equality and Diversity issues [54]. The researcher emailed the 47 listed representatives inviting them to a short interview and requesting to circulate the project amongst disabled employees, since there was no other way to get in contact with them. The research was also posted in the university's intranet in the Equality and Diversity webpage in order to invite more people to participate in the project.

This strategy generated a total of 14 respondents, which was less than it was originally expected and the length of the interviews varied between 30 and 85 minutes. The initial plan was to interview two employees- one disabled and one non-disabled- from each department in order to identify the way different departments operate. However, this goal was not achieved since the researcher could not find one disabled and one non-disabled employee from every department in the university. The final sample was equally divided between disabled and non-disabled employees. There was an over-representation of women (9 women and 5 men) which confirms the view that work-life balance is still identified as an issue addressed to the female workforce [46] and sets the danger of biased information for the second research question which tried to identify any difference in the take up rate between male and female employees who characterised themselves as disabled.

The sample population was disabled and non-disabled employees of the university in order to establish any differences in the use of work-life balance practices while our interest lies on the perceptions of both groups of employees regarding the reasons which shape their decision to request for flexible working arrangements. The non-disabled employees were not equally divided according to gender as it was only one male employee who participated in the research. One of the respondents mentioned that she had experienced disability in the past, health and mental problems as well, but not anymore. Out of the non-disabled employees, two women were managers, two women were administrators and three were academic staff, from which one was the male interviewee.

Within the disabled population the identified types of long-term health problems were learning difficulties (2), musculo-skeletal problems regarding hands and legs (2), difficulty in hearing (1), speech impediment (1), chest, breathing problems (1), heart, blood, pressure, circulation (1), stomach, liver, kidney, digestion (1) and mental illness (4). Many of the respondents mentioned that they experience more than one type of disability at the same time while mental health problems appeared, in many cases, to be a result of the experience of disability problems. From the disabled interviewees three of them were women and four men while out of all seven disabled interviewees, five of them reported that they have declared their disability to the university. Out of the disabled employees, the three female employees were occupied in administrative positions, three men were academics and one male employee was working as advisor.

6. RESULTS- DISCUSSION

The aim of the project was to estimate the use of work-life balance practices by employees according to their disabled status in a university. The rationale behind this research is the fact that work-life balance practices are generally offered more by public sector companies [16] and that according to the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) public bodies should promote equality of opportunity for disabled people (Office of Public Sector Information, DDA 2005). Moreover, the focus on the disabled population derives from the limited information provided by the existing literature on the use of such practices by a disadvantaged group of employees who have actually suggested that the provision of flexible arrangements by the employers would improve their disadvantaged position in the labour market [11].

- Are there any differences between disabled and non-disabled employees in the use of work-life balance practices?

The findings do not indicate any significant difference in the use of work-life balance practices between the disabled and the non-disabled population in the university. Of the non-disabled population only one employee stated that she is not working from home and while among the disabled population, 4 employees use it regularly. Therefore, in both groups, the most attractive flexible arrangement was homeworking, contrary to results from the study 'Barriers to employment for disabled people' which stated that employers were more likely to refuse homeworking since it includes considerable costs (Department of work and pensions, 2002). However, universities have traditionally included working from home as a working pattern contrary to other companies. As indicated by the Baseline Study 2000 and based on the findings of this research, among the disabled population the least attractive arrangements were job share, mainly for financial reasons and flexitime, mainly because the nature of the job was flexible or because the employees did not actually ask for it. Among the non-disabled employees, the least attractive option were compressed working week, since nobody mentioned it as a preferable working pattern, and annualised hours, due to the long hours they would have to work the other days and the fact that it did not suit the nature of the job, when the respondents were employed in customer facing posts. However, in both groups of employees there exist differences in the working arrangements that are being used, based on the individual's needs.

- Are there any gender differences in the use of work-life balance practices among disabled employees?

As mentioned above, the limitations regarding the question preclude a definite answer. Based only on the sample of the disabled population in the research, somebody would argue that men use flexible arrangements more than women since between the four men and three women, only the male employees stated any use of work-life balance. However, this contradicts the existing literature which suggests that it is still the case that the female workforce is more likely to ask for flexible arrangements [16]. Thus, the explanation of this paradox should be searched in the posts held by male and female employees with disabilities in the university.

As stated by many researchers [8] disabled women experience particularly restricted job opportunities (40% in semi-skilled jobs compared to 32% of the non-disabled women) and are employed mostly in clerical and secretarial jobs. This is the case of the disabled female workforce of the sample. Administration is a customer facing job whose nature is not linked with the use of work-life balance practices [10] and this can explain the fact that these women did not make use of flexible arrangements. However, academics are traditionally related to flexible working patterns and have a great deal of autonomy in their work. This is the reason why the male employees, who were occupied in higher posts such as tutors and researchers, have the opportunity to work more flexibly.

Why do employees with disability make more or less use of the work-life balance practices?

The main explanation for the fact that there **is not a significant difference in the take up of work-life balance practices** can be attributed to the fact that the reasons for their non-use are the same between disabled and non-disabled population. It is possible that the disabled people's need to be employed on equal footing does not let them request flexible working arrangement more than their non-disabled co-workers [11] or, in the case of those who choose not to declare it, managers might not know what practice would be suitable for their needs. **Consequently, for disabled and non-disabled population the reasons that explain their decision not to use flexible working arrangements are the same as identified by the literature regarding work-life balance practices.**

Organisational culture is a factor which affects the use of these practices since the employer's decision to offer flexible arrangements is the most significant factor which determines the accessibility to work-life balance options by the employees [24]. From interviewing non-disabled employees mainly, it became apparent to the researcher that the dominant culture of the university is the one of long-hours, stated by both men and women, thus setting a barrier to the wide use of work-life balance practices.

The most important problem, however, has to do with the line manager's role.

Managing directors are found to exert leadership influences over flexibility and the scope for individuals to benefit from informal arrangements is often attached to power issues since line managers and directors can use their power either to provide or refuse the provision of these arrangements [16]. Also, very few line managers have been trained on work-life balance issues while evidence shows that even after the introduction of formal policies, their interpretation and implementation can be subject to informal and uniform line manager discretion [27].

The majority of non-disabled employees responded that their line manager is sensitive towards work-life balance issues and will support their requests about flexible arrangements. However, they mention that they appreciate the nature of their job implying that they would not approach their manager with an unreasonable request. One participant mentioned she does not know how her line manager feels about it while two implied that their line manager is not very understanding towards these matters and tend to support the culture of long hours.

When the disabled employees were asked whether their line managers would allow them to work more flexibly if requested, five out of seven responded that their line manager would totally understand if they were to approach him for a request regarding flexible working arrangements. One mentioned that he doesn't know and one said no. However, once again it was recognised that business needs come first when they are about to request for a flexible arrangement.

The fact that employees **might not be aware of the benefits** to which they are entitled came up during the interviews. **Ignorance** and **unawareness** are the main reasons that explain why individual employees do not ask for these practices [10].

Among the non-disabled employees, only one person responded that she is not informed about what she can ask from the university. Only a manager appeared confident of knowing exactly what is being offered and that is because of the nature of her job. The rest of them all mentioned that they know that they can find the necessary information on the website. However, this tends to rely on their own interest and initiative or the nature of their job.

Out of the disabled employees, only one participant, who works as an HR Advisor responded that he feels informed about the working practices which are being offered and only one person stated that she is very well informed around disability issues. The rest of them mentioned that they are not aware of what they can ask for. However, they would approach their line manager if a particular circumstance came up.

7. DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

The analysis of the university's documents demonstrates that work-life balance is a primary issue on the university's agenda and the existence of Equality and Diversity policy which explicitly cites disability creates good managerial relations, as it was originally stated in the WERS survey 1998 (as analyzed by John Forth and Ana Rincon- Aznar, 2008). Within the Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan for 2006-2009, the university explains how it will ensure the promotion of equality for disabled people. In order to do that, the university supports the social model of disability stating that *'disabled people do not face disadvantages because of their impairments but experience discrimination on the way we organise society'* (University's website, 2008). However, the fact that there are no formal policies about the provision and implementation of work-life balance seems to disappoint the employees who appeared more in favour of formalised agreements. This statement contradicts existing literature which emphasizes the benefits of informality in the provision of work-life balance practices. According to Hall and Atkinson (2005), informal flexibility is based on ongoing negotiations between manager and employees, thus, putting management skills at the forefront. However, written policies appear more attractive to disabled and non- disabled employees of the university thus questioning the view that informal flexible working is more prevalent and highly valued by the employees and confirming that line managers are not always the most appropriate people to deal with issues of work-life balance [27].

As stated in the University's Flexible Working Guidelines business needs are priority for the provision of the practices⁵⁴. The fact that the introduction of work- life balance practices is based on business competitive factors constitutes a serious problem for their actual take up since it recognises that the practices have to suit the company instead of the employees' needs[27].The fact that business needs are the incentive for the introduction of flexible arrangements is also evident to the employees and accepted as they are aware of the fact that they would be denied a certain arrangement if it would be costly for the university.

Consequently, business case is what seems to define the availability of work-life balance practices in the workplace and not their disabled status. As mentioned by the interviewees, disabled and non-disabled employees, and as stated by the university, flexible working arrangements will be provided to the employees only if the benefits outweigh the potential costs [16]. However, a business case is hard to be justified when it comes to the employability of disabled employees [62] as, in addition to the fact that this approach can lead to low take up rates of work-life balance practices by the employees of all status [27], the diversity of impairments found within the disabled employees precludes the identification of universal skills which would economically justify the management of diversity [62] The university as an employer recognises that the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 has placed a general duty on all higher educational institutions to promote disability equality and make any necessary adjustments [54]. However, business case is still a priority in the introduction of work-life balance practices thus affecting their perceived accessibility by the disabled population.

8. DOMINANCE OF INDIVIDUAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

The university, as stated in the Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan for 2006-2009, encourages individuals to declare their disability so that they can provide them with the appropriate services. However, there exists only a percentage of 1.9% of the employees who have informed the university that they have some type of disability.

Consequently, it is still the case that the employees choose not to declare their disability. People still consider disability as their own problem and the limitations that they face in their everyday lives as a result of their impairment [42]. Thus, even though the individual model of disability has been severely criticised by disabled people and clearly rejected by the university, it is still the case that the dominant approach to disability is that of personal pathology [8] than socially constructed, taking for a fact that disabled population will always be in a disadvantaged position in the labour market [6].

Moreover, when the disabled employees were asked to recommend changes that would help them perform better in their work, the responses were addressed to more practical things such as more disabled toilets and better sign-posting. It was only one participant who mentioned that what has to be changed is the organisational culture indicating that disabled people themselves consider disability a personal issue which is not relevant to their workplace.

9. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the research found out that there is no significant difference in the use of work-life balance practices between disabled and non-disabled employees, that there are no gender difference within the disabled population and that both groups of employees share the same reasons for not using them. However, due to the limited resources such as time and access to a small sample of employees in such sensitive topic like disability, this research may not be able to generate

any accurate conclusions. Also, the number of disabled employees who chose to keep their disability hidden sets another important limitation since the sample of disabled population might not be representative of the whole disabled workforce of the university. Furthermore, the issue of work-life balance and disability was investigated in a University and the results may not be applicable to private companies or other public bodies.

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