
WORK-LIFE BENEFITS: MANAGERS' VIEWS ON IMPLEMENTATION IN JORDANIAN TELECOMMUNICATION COMPANIES

Dr. Mahmoud Abubaker

Al Aqsa University, Palestine;
School of Management, University of Bradford, UK.

Dr. Christopher Bagley

Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Southampton, UK.

Purpose

To examine how and to what extent two leading Jordanian telecommunication companies offer Work-Life Benefits (WLB) in a rapidly expanding sector.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Using Critical Realist methodology, 10 senior managers were interviewed, with standardized qualitative analysis of extended interviews.

Findings

Interviews identified three types of WLB: (1) Leave arrangements; (2) Financial WLB; (3) Flexible practices. One company offered more generous WLB, but interviews indicated that market competition for professional personnel, including an increasing proportion (about 24%) of well-qualified women in the two companies, influenced WLB provision, such as subsidized childcare. Other influential factors were government regulations, and the cultural values of an Arabic, Muslim country.

Originality/Value

This is the first study of WLB provision in Jordan, and one of the few in any country of the Middle East. Findings suggest that WLB in international companies must adapt to local religious and cultural values, and the emerging roles of women towards equality in the workforce, when they combine traditional roles of family care, and rewarding work outside of the home.

Keywords: Work-Life Balance, Jordan, Qualitative Research, Critical Realism, Arab Culture, Islam, Telecommunications

Work-Life Benefits

Work-Life Benefits (WLB) aiming to help employees balance demands of home, family, leisure and work, in order to maximise employee satisfaction, are well-developed in Western countries. Sometimes these benefits (e.g. paid maternity leave) are required by legislation, but often employers themselves initiate such benefits, or grant them in response to employee demands or requests since WLBs can enhance employee satisfaction, increase productivity, and reduce employee turnover. This is especially important when highly skilled labour is in short supply.

Among the few research studies of such practices in developing countries are those of Heinen & Mulvaney (2008) who found that WLB practices in non-Western contexts frequently responded to concerns about family health insurance, retirement plans, subsidised education for children and other practices where state welfare systems are not well-developed, as well as meeting particular cultural needs. Little previous research on WLB in Arabic countries exists (Abubaker, 2015).

The case studies reported here are based on extended interviews with ten senior managers in two Jordanian telecommunications companies. These managers who describe how they implemented forms WLB in Jordan offer a starting point within the critical realist paradigm, of gaining both an objective and a subjective understanding of implementing WLB policy and practice. The research interviews (conducted in Arabic by the first author) did not test hypotheses, since the field is not yet developed enough for quantitative research. The broad research question posed was: What is the role and impact of WLB practices in the selected Jordanian organisations?

Jordan: The Research Setting

Jordan, population about eight millions has increasing attractiveness to international companies and investors. By 2012 Jordan had a literacy rate surpassing 95 percent. A quarter of women are employed full-time, a rapidly increasing trend. Economic and technological expansion has greatly increased the demand for an educated work force, and women are increasingly filling these roles. A collectivist culture rather than an individualistic one still prevails: for example, obligations to care for extended kin are strong. Many family members live in shared households with parents and grandparents, with extended families living close enough to assist each other. Arabic norms are reflected in gender roles, with men traditionally being “bread-winners”, women’s main role being “family management”.

Foreign direct investment in Jordanian enterprises was about US\$3 billions in 2011 (Ghunmi et al., 2013). Jordan is a regional leader in telecommunication and information technology marketing, a sector expected to recruit 18,000 highly skilled workers by 2020. Many of these workers will be women graduates, requiring employers to consider supporting women’s traditional obligations if they wish to hire them as full-time workers.

This study focuses on adherence in two large organisations to the guiding laws and regulations for employee benefits in Jordan, and the degree to which they provided various WLB practices. Government regulations, formally at least, “require” a maximum working week of 48 hours over six days, with breaks for meals and prayer. Each worker in organisations with 20+ employees is (formally, although not always in practice)

entitled to 28 days paid leave per year, and 14 days paid sick leave per annum. Paid maternity leave is for 10 weeks. Women on return to work have an hour's paid leave each day, for one year, for breast-feeding. Further unpaid leave of a year with the right of return to work must be provided at mother's request. Leave must also be given to men and women for travel to The Hajj pilgrimage. These rather generous rights given to workers in larger organisations reflect the Islamic nature of the culture, which holds that women in general, and mothers in particular are deserving of special support.

The Interviews

Face-to-face interviews took an hour. The managers (9 men and 1 woman) all had more than four years in senior management, and were responsible for formulating, evaluating or administering human relations policy, as well as for marketing.

The WLB practices identified encompass three areas: Social and Cultural WLB; Financial WLB; and Leave Arrangements. An interesting finding across both companies was the right of employees to have personal phone calls and visitors at work; praying-time breaks; reduced hours of work (leaving at 1:00 pm) during the fasting month of Ramadan; bereavement, and wedding leave; and leave for Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah. These practices reflect cultural and religious factors and support the idea of Heinen & Mulvaney (2008), that cultural factors in Arabic society would lead to the emergence of WLB practices that do not exist in western contexts. Main financial benefits in both companies were subsidized health insurance; financial allowances for parents; paid study leave; provision of a childcare centre (in one Company); free mobile phone calls; subsidized family trips for one month abroad; and family membership of sports clubs.

Adopting WLB practices was largely due to cultural, social and market pressures, rather than government's lax labour laws. This was particularly so regarding religious matters. There was legal flexibility for employers in adopting a reduction in working hours during Ramadan: but this enabled employees to support traditions of the Ramadan fasting month. Concerning other Social WLB practices, it was common for workers to be visited by friends or phone them during the working day. There is no general conception in Arabic society of part of the day being for work and part for social life.

On the impact of women, in both organisations there were both self-serving and ambiguous responses. In one case childcare facilities were provided, associated with significant costs for the company. The only reason for this adoption appears to be that the organisations found that in assisting women employees, there was a marked reduction in taking emergency leaves. It was clear that women graduates with professional and technical skills are in demand in the telecommunication and other sectors in an economically expanding country, and employers are prepared to provide support which helps such women balance demands of 'traditional' family responsibilities, and entering the professional work force. The entry of women into the external labour force represents an important social change in the Arab world, and deserves further study.

HRM in Jordan, according to our case studies, is more systematic than the overview of Aladwan et al. (2014) would imply: but WLB in the organisations studied offer a picture of cultural uniqueness. Future research, as we have achieved in Palestine, must interview managers and workers at all levels if WLB policies and practices can be fully described and assessed (Abubaker, 2015). Strategically, large companies (often with international investment) in Arab countries such as Jordan must consider implementing a range of WLB practices to meld with local values, and to recruit and retain skilled and professional women, a growing sector of the workforce.

References

1. Abubaker, M. (2015) *Work life balance policies and practices: Case studies of the Palestinian telecommunications sector*. Bradford, UK: School of Management, University of Bradford, doctoral dissertation.
2. Aladwan, K., Bhanugopan, R., Stuart, C. & Fish, A. (2014) Managing human resources in Jordanian organisations: Challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management*, 7(1), 126-138.
3. Ghunmi, D.A., Al-Zu'bi, B., Badreddine, S. & Chaudry, S. (2013) Foreign direct investment in Jordan. *International Journal of Business*, 18(3) 20-32.
4. Heinen, B. & Mulvaney, R. (2008) Global factors influencing work-life policies and practices: Description and implications for multinational companies. *WorldatWork Journal*, 17(1) 41-52.