

# WORK-LIFE BALANCE: THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

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## ABSTRACT

*There are indications that employees' personal lives impact on workplace outcomes, hence, the importance of social support initiatives towards actualizing work-life balance. In view of extant literature on social support initiatives and the changing dynamics of the modern workplace, this conceptual paper expounds the significance of work and non-work integration through social support initiatives, using data collected from secondary source and analyzed to suit the purpose of the study. It provides constructive pathways to maintaining equilibrium between work and non-work demands. Recommendations are proffered to employees and organizations on the need to adopt social support initiatives as a strategy to reduce stress, strengthen workplace and personal relationships and facilitate workplace performance on multiple levels.*

**Keywords:** Work-Life Balance, Social Support, Work-Family Conflict, Work Environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Current research trends have established the view that new concepts and thought patterns supersede preconceived or traditional notions about the workplace. Heerwagen et al. (2010) opined that “*the structure, content and process of work is now more cognitively complex, dependent on social skill and time pressured*” to mention a few. The efficient transition to new work settings, systems and processes is critical for inclusive and positive employee contribution. Thus, the growth and sustainability of an organization is based not only on the knowledge bank at the employee's disposal, but of requisite significance is the pace by which knowledge is acquired and shared (Chen, 2010; Adenuga et al., 2020). Unlike previous generations of employees, the 21<sup>st</sup> century employee owns an important means of production which is the intellectual capital displayed in innovation and performance (Blackler, 1995).

Management's most important contribution to today's workforce is absolute commitment to the development of insightful, well-rounded employees (Drucker, 1999). A vital facet of this contribution is the provision of a supportive family-responsive work environment. Singh & Khanna (2011) describe work-life balance as the aspiration of employees and employers to balance between work and life. This aspiration must be founded on the collaboration of multiple stakeholders within the workplace and outside. Synergizing the domains of work and life necessitates support from all strata of management, family and other informal social networks.

Researchers have consistently emphasized the importance of social support in facilitating the physical, mental and general effectiveness of employees (Newman et al., 2011). Bartlett (2001) found a significant relationship between supervisor support and employee commitment and illustrated the potential benefits that might be derived from work environments where investments in training and development initiatives are supported by supervisors or managers. It

is necessary for persons who seek adaptive occupational roles and career transition to work in an environment that promotes social support. Co-worker and supervisor support are significant aspects of the social support network in the work environment and is a pointer that there is a support-centered workplace (Karatepe, 2013; Michel et al., 2013). Employees who work in a supportive environment with assistance coming from co-workers, supervisors and those capable of developing their careers have the potential of actualizing outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment (Guan et al., 2015; Olowookere et al., 2020). The interaction of the work and life domains has received much attention in management literature in developed nations but there is paucity of research in this area in Nigeria. Akanji (2012) stated that Nigeria, like many other countries face issues involving work life balance. However, what distinguishes Nigeria from others is leadership hence, the need to consider social support to work life balance in Nigeria. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to provide conceptual clarifications and discuss the relevance of formal and informal social support to work-life balance in modern organizations in Nigeria context. This study employs a thematic review approach to critically analyze the relevance of social support on work-life balance.

The paper is divided into three sections: Introduction, literature review and conclusion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Work-life Balance

The concept of work -life balance has been defined by researchers in diverse ways owing to its broad conception. The diversity in definitions originates from early research on work-life balance as it relates to studies on women having multiple roles. The concept of work-life balance emerged in the 1930s with Kellogs as the first organization to embrace it (Lockwood, 2003). Generally, it is concerned with providing an inclusive range of work options within the limits of the organizations, so that employees can have the freedom to choose which is best for them. A balanced life, according to Yadav & Rani (2015), is one in which effort is made towards maintaining stability in the areas of intellect, emotion, physical, spiritual, and mental prominent areas of significance. The disregard of one or more of the identified areas, may affect the quality of the entire. These domains of life are perceived to be correlative; hence poor understanding and management of any of these life areas may result in a situation of imbalance in the life of an individual (Shobitha & Sudarsan, 2014).

Clark (2000) defined work-life balance as the measure by which individuals are proportionately occupied as well as fulfilled with work and family roles. The balance of work and life is concerned with regulating personal desires or ambitions and defining reasonable objectives which do not conflict with family obligations (Parsons, 2002). It should not be understood as suggesting proportionate balance or equal number of time for one's work and personal activities (Ranjan & Prasad, 2013). It is about regulating work patterns to realize fulfillment both at home and work, and allows for organizations to enable employees combine work with non-work responsibilities and desires. Work-life balance can also be described as a level of satisfied involvement between the multiple roles in an individual's life; it could also be seen as a "*fit*" in between various roles of life (Dev & Manoj, 2017). Work life balance initiatives include organizational policies and practices that are aimed at achieving a complementary relationship between work and life. The policies underpin the practices which are targeted at fostering the autonomy and flexibility of employees. Examples of such practices

include, flexi-time, compressed hours, job sharing, child care, self-rostering and teleworking. Work-life balance as provided by Lois & Greg (2017) can also be the health indicator of employees and firms. Work-life balance is an indicator of positive organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover, job satisfaction, reduced job stress, increased morale and performance (Lockwood, 2003). Integrating work into life and having a balance is not only beneficial to employees but even the organization, since, the employee's health is protected leading to increased productivity in the organization as a whole (Türker, 2017). Suhendro (2018) established that there is a positive relationship between work-life balance and motivation of employees specifically in the public-sector.

## **Social Support**

The concept of social support is validated by the social exchange theory which implies that interpersonal relationships are a form of social exchange involving the reciprocation of valued resources (Berkowitz et al., 1965; Ladebo, 2005). One of the earliest definitions of social support is by Cobb (1976), who defined the concept as the confidence an individual has that, he or she is loved, valued, and his or her well-being is cared about among a social network of shared relationships. Support refers to emotional concern or empathy, informational and instrumental assistance offered by individuals such as co-workers, supervisors or family members (Thoits, 2011). Social support in the workplace is the extent to which people perceive their welfare as important by work environment sources, such as colleagues, managers or supervisors and the broader organization in which they are employed (Kossek et al., 2011). It is an imperative asset for limiting the negative impacts of stress and work-family conflict (Md-Sidin et al., 2008). Employers can provide an encouraging work environment (Omonijo et al., 2015) by embracing family support activities, which are necessary for the family domain of employees' lives (Boles et al., 1997). Shan et al. (2018) established that social support related to work from co-workers and family members can provide room for psychological positive work.

Social support at work is the extent to which employees recognize that superiors care about their general welfare at work through the provision of social resources corresponding to employees' tasks or goals (Kossek et al., 2011). Carlson & Perrewe (1999) identified two types of social support; work-related social support and non-work social support. Work-related social support refers to the willingness of organization members to provide support within the workplace. Non-work social support is the display of concern and willingness to assist an employee in non-work-related matters. This may be demonstrated by supervisory assistance to resolving work-family conflicts. An effective means of categorizing social support is through its source. Support may be provided by people within an organization for example, supervisors, subordinates, co-workers, even customers and the organization in general. These sources are often tagged in literature as perceived co-worker support, perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support (Rahnfeld et al., 2013). Other informal sources of support include spouses, family relations, friends or close associates, and other affiliates.

Xu & Burleson (2001) identified different types of social support strategy such as: emotional, esteem, relationships, substantial, and information. Emotional support involves expressions of compassion, and concern. Esteem support provides encouragement that increases levels morale, empowers and boosts enthusiasm. It includes expressions of admiration, validation, and confidence to improve others' sense of self. Informational support includes any conduct that offers guidance or information to enable a person respond to challenging issues (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). The significance of informational support lies in advice and counsel,

as recipients obtain instruction and guidance on how to handle multitudinous situations. Wills & Shinar (2000) also highlighted two other types of support i.e., instrumental support and companionship support. Instrumental support refers to useful and prompt help that is given when it is required, including assisting with tasks, giving childcare, offering transportation, and loaning cash. According to Scott (2010), instrumental support is also referred to as tangible support, involves accepting responsibilities for someone other than the individual facing the problem or in other words taking an active step to helping individual overcome specific challenges they are experiencing. Examples of tangible support includes, the supply of required items (e.g., cash, nourishment, books) and offering of services (e.g., looking after children, writing) (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). Companionship support enables people to take an interest in relaxation and social exercises, including recreational exercises, trips, and cultural activities (Jang, 2012).

The impact and viability of social support can be examined in the light of the beneficiary qualities as beneficiaries require various types of support. Elements to be considered consist of individuals' sex, age, race, background and interpersonal qualities. Thus, effects on individuals tend to vary, based on recipients' characteristics even when corresponding social support are proposed (Jang, 2012). For instance, a man refuses to accept assistance of any kind from others because of preconceived notions that such depicts a sign of weakness, whereas a woman may be more likely to request and consider social support within such circumstance (Burda & Vaux, 1987).

Men and women rarely encounter macrosocial changes in similar manner with regards to social losses and bonding (Knoll & Schwarzer, 2002). All through the life-cycle, women have more companions than men (Bell, 1981), this develops from young adult age as they have tendency to build up more personal relationship than young men, while young men tend to cluster together in groups (Belle, 1989). Women are more likely than men to give and receive emotional support. Men are probably not going to get emotional help from male companions and may likely not have many friends, as a significant number depend on female relatives for emotional support (Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Literature on gender suggests that females unlike males are more likely to exchange emotional support with their acquaintances, neighbours, and colleagues (Gallagher, 1994; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Thoits, 1995).

People in general maintain social ties with many individuals throughout existence. However, throughout the latter part of adolescence the proportion of social engagements starts to reduce (Knoll & Schwarzer, 2002). As individuals get more established, their willingness to cooperate with colleagues and their fulfillment levels from these interactions decrease. They specifically prune their informal networks, concentrating time and effort on familiar social contacts, such as, loved ones and companions (Siedlecki et al., 2014). Khushboo & Rachna, (2018) found out that the connection between social support and general satisfaction is partially mediated by work-life balance of graduates sampling engineering students.

### **Work-Life Balance and Social Support**

Most theories that explain the concept of work-family/life conflict are related with health status and wellbeing. Cohen & Wills (1985) state that social support protects individuals from possible effects of stressors when support initiatives are integrated into social system. This emphasizes the fact that social support prevents negative health effects of stressful occurrences. The stress and coping theory identified events in themselves as stressful in as much as individuals have contrary impression about the situation and subsist unproductively. Social support therefore suggests means of adaption and coping in such situation (Thoits, 1986). Social

cognitive theory evaluates intellectual, emotional and other aspects of individual conduct for comprehending behavioural changes (Bandura, 1997). The environment refers to the elements that constitute and impact a person's behaviour; this includes physical and social environment. The social environment includes family relations, colleagues and friends. Physical environment refers to the size of the rooms, the ambient temperature or availability of certain food. Situation represents the cognitive or mental presentation of a surrounding that may affect an individual's behaviour. Behaviour is often productive when the appropriate social and physical environment structures are provided.

Stress in the work environment is a huge concern inferable from environmental conditions where employees confront heightening states of exhaustion, work uncertainty, role ambiguity, work overload, low job satisfaction and an absence of autonomy. The degree of stress experienced and the way in which an individual reacts to such stressful situations may be affected by various factors such as, social help, individual personalities, evaluation of the stressor, life events and socio-demographic or occupational variables. Dorman & Zapf (1999) opined that many employees manage a great deal of anxiety at work. The demand on employees is not commensurate to the level of social support available; hence stress, burnout and depression may become characteristic of the workforce (Oyewunmi et al., 2015). Work load has been identified as having a significant negative impact on the work- life balance of employees (Abdulraheem, 2014). Mathew & Panchanatham (2011) found that dependent care issues, lack of time management and low family support, were major factors creating imbalance in family and work life. They opine that both men and women are affected by challenges originating from work-life imbalance, as it results in conflict between spouses, separation and divorce. This in turn brings about psychological conflict and lack of family satisfaction (Forson, 2013). The implementation of social support initiatives however, can advance personal satisfaction of employees by reducing work-life conflict.

Social support is an important factor that can moderate the impact of workplace stress (Türker, 2017). Increased social support has been related with an upsurge in subjective general life fulfillment (Young, 2006; Malinauskas, 2010; Onyishi et al. (2012) conducted a study on social support as predictors of life satisfaction of Nigerian prisons officers. They discovered that just like in any part of the world the provision of social support to officers is necessary in reducing the impact of stress on officers thereby resulting to increased life fulfillment and satisfaction.

Another study found that poor quality and quality of social relations and support could result in depression and different types of health-related issues (Okhakhume & Aroniyaso, 2017). Uchino et al. (1996) state that individuals who have social support have a reduced tendency for depression and as this support provides a level of psychological stability that decreases anxiety. Support from organizational and family members will go a long way in preventing depression from surfacing when employees are overwhelmed. It reduces the level at which an individual perceives a situation as stressful, fosters healthy relationships amongst colleagues and family members whilst enhancing physical and mental wellbeing (Afolabi & Dahunsi, 2013).

Social support includes workplace support and family related support (Brough & Pears, 2004). An employee benefits from support coming from organization members such as co-workers and supervisors which is regarded as work related social support, whereas support from parent, spouse, children, friends or close associates is regarded as personal social support. Work-life balance is enhanced in the workplace as a result of positive impact of social support on the

working roles (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Tavassoli & Sune, 2018). Marcinkus et al. (2006) found social support to be a strong indicator of work fulfillment, organizational commitment and career achievement. Thiede & Ganster (1995) analyzed the impact of organizational policies and practices that were connected to work-life balance and the mental, physical and behavioural effect of stress. They found that supportive practices, particularly adaptable scheduling and supportive managers had direct beneficial outcomes on employee's view of control over work and family matters. In essence, social support, either work or family related, impacts work and family role positively because it helps in sharing the contemplation and the issues emerging out of work and personal engagements. Erdwins et al. (2001) stated that supervisor and spouse support are responsible for developing and modifying variations related to work-family balance.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the review of literature, we found that organizations keen on executing and fostering social support must be cognisant that it requires some level of consciousness of employees' needs. The usage of measures to encourage social support should not be perceived as constrained, improper, or superfluous (Deelstra et al., 2003). Positive organizational and personal relationships amongst co-workers, and managers or supervisors are required to make optimal use of relevant platforms for the implementation of these practices. Rahnfeld et al. (2013) state that to expand social support in the workplace, the start point is to establish positive rapport. This can be achieved by establishing social networks and fostering existing relationships. This relationship is what makes social capital; that is, the resources available in and through personal and industrial enterprise within an organization (Oludayo et al., 2015). Social affiliations with others tend to be characterized by mutual appreciation. Individuals should be conscious of the law of reciprocity in order to receive social support. Beehr et al. (2000) state that individual support can be characterized into worldwide functional individual support, communication about positive issues at work, communication about negative issues at work and communication about non-work-related issues. There is need to articulate help, which implies looking for and requesting help, and acknowledging support endeavours from others in the workplace.

Leader-subordinate relationships underpin the work-family concept. A positive leader-subordinate relationship is important to workplace outcomes such as work-family balance. Major & Morganson (2011) describe the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory to explain the role of managers, leaders or supervisors in fostering subordinate work-life balance. A positive relationship between managers and subordinates will enable managers to provide diverse forms of work-family support for subordinates. As important agents of the organization, supervisors and managers play a significant role in driving social support in the work environment, with notable effects on their employees' wellbeing, job fulfillment, efficiency, and turnover intentions. Supervisors and managers must design and partake in focused social support training initiatives aimed at increasing awareness on the need to support others when required. When supervisors and managers provide support to subordinates, they, in turn, urge subordinates to offer help to each other (Rahnfeld et al., 2013).

The organization's responsibility on the other hand is to develop socially favorable conditions which require building up structures and pragmatic solution that allow for effective and collaborative togetherness at work, by facilitating social communication and interaction among employees. Organizations must place special attention on groups, and teams where collaboration is empowered and rewarded. When there is a supposed '*culture of gratitude*', individuals are not anxious of requesting help and do not fear negative outcomes. Great working

conditions, equity, and rewards additionally portray organizational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger (2002). Rahnfeld et al. (2013) identified that in every organization there are “*key persons*” who help, listen, and give guidance where or when necessary. It is important to that these groups of people are acknowledged and appreciated.

There is a consensus that social support is a key initiative which has significant impact on health, well-being and job satisfaction which is beneficial to both the employee and organization. Managers, supervisors, co-workers and family members play significant roles in providing support and enhancing individual effectiveness. Organizations should not force employees to assist each other, but provided foundation to facilitate the process of creating a supportive atmosphere that allows for employees’ career advancement. The creation of social groups, recreation centers or outlets will aid employees to relax and revitalize during breaks or non-work hours. Employees must be encouraged to maintain proximity with family members and build rapport with people in their immediate environment. Social network is an indication of social integration and the more an individual is integrated, the more the individual can adapt to the impacts of distressing life situations. Organizations must invest in training line managers, supervisors and all employees on the strategic importance of social support within and outside the workplace.

### **Suggestions for Further Studies**

Despite the vast amount of research in the area of social support at work, there are a little evaluation studies investigating the level of effectiveness of social support intervention programs. Future studies may adopt a mixed-method approach in evaluating the effectiveness of these programs.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The importance of balancing work with life activities was brought to bear in the study. The study reviewed related studies on work life balance and social support and drew it findings from their focuses.

The study in its concluding remarks, argued that balancing work with life could be a great step to living a successful life in modern societies full of diverse challenges. Therefore, both the employers of labor and employees should play their parts in ensuring its successful implementation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We recognize the support received from the Covenant University Centre for Research and Innovation Development (CUCRID) in respect of the publication fees of this paper.

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