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Work-life balance in Spanish Firms: Still on the to-do list

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the perception of institutional pressures on employers to improve work-life balance, and to classify organizations according to those perceptions. Using survey data from 146 Spanish private firms in two different industries, the cluster analysis clearly shows the existence of three different groups of companies according to their perception of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures, and the different characteristics of the groups. The diffusion of work-life practices should have begun in Spain, but there is still a long way to go over.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN SPANISH FIRMS: STILL ON THE TO-DO LIST

Introduction

During recent years there is growing concern in achieving a good balance between work and non works commitments. Single parents, working women, dual-career couples and fathers heavily involved in parenting are some of the factors that literature have remarked to highlight the importance of the work-life balance in Spain. (De Luis et al., 2004).

Much of the work-life balance literature has limited its research to Anglo-Saxon context, but considering the heterogeneity of legislative frameworks and the diversity of cultures, values, practice and habits throughout the world, the importance of focusing on other cultural contexts is clear. Work-life balance issues are particular sensitive to national context to the extent that national context may influence research about individual attitudes and behaviours, HR practices, work-life cultures and public policies.

Institutional theory has been commonly used for studying the adoption and diffusion of organizational practices among organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations that share the same environment will employ similar practices and will become isomorphic with each other (Kostova & Roth, 2002). It is important to take into account the different national conditions (legislative, sociocultural, economic, and political) and its influence on the organizational involvement to work-life balance (Poelmans 2005), and institutional theory is an appropriate perspective to consider those many elements of the environment.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how organisations perceive institutional pressures to improve work-life balance in a non Anglo-Saxon context, classifying them according to those

perceptions. The grouping of these organizations could provide a map of types or approaches to work-life balance.

The paper is organised in the following way. The next section reviews work-life balance concept, Spanish context and Institutional Theory. Then it will be presented the methodology taking into account the population and sample, the identification of the variables, and finally the resulted clusters. Finally, the paper concludes with conclusions, limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical background

Work-life balance concept

Early studies did not emerge until the late sixties, when Kahn et al. (1964) identified work-family conflict as a significant source of stress for employees. More recently, the concept of equilibrium between family and professional life (Work-Family Balance) refers to the successful development of both areas. Clark (2001) defines work-life balance as the satisfaction and good performance at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict. This brings us to a broader concept of balance, which includes both positive and negative aspects of participation in both roles (Frone, 2003). In an attempt to reflect the needs of all employees, with or without daily family responsibilities, Galinsky et al. (1996) coined the term "work-life balance". There is a recent shift in terminology used to refer to this phenomenon, with many organisations using the term "work–life balance" so as to include employees who are not parents but who desire balance for non-work activities such as sports, study, and travel (Kalliath & Brought, 2008).

Although the term work-life balance is widely employed, an agreed definition has proved elusive. Kalliath and Brough (2008) reviewed six conceptualisations found in the literature: 1) multiple roles, 2) equity across multiple roles, 3) satisfaction between multiple roles, 4) fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles, 5) a relationship between conflict and satisfaction, and 6) perceived control between multiple roles. Based on this review, they proposed a new definition of this construct: work-life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities

Additionally, authors such as Greenhaus and Powell (2006) defined work-life enrichment as the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role. Specifically, enrichment focuses on resources gained form one domain to the other, while balance refers to management of work and non-work responsibilities (Poelmans et al., 2008).

Many companies devote resources to work-life initiatives to adjust their organizational structures to the needs of workers, or to respond to government regulations in terms of integration and gender equality and protection to families (Kossek et al, 2010) The literature points to the need for further studies, considering work-life initiatives as a way to respond to the changing demographics of the workforce and the competitive market. Work-life benefits have the potential to simultaneously improve quality of life of workers and organizational effectiveness. (Peters & Heusinkveld, 2010).

Spanish context

Spain is different, or at least this was an old slogan to promote Spain around the world. But how is Spain different? And how this different environment is relevant for work-life balance?

Traditionally, Spanish culture places great importance on the family unit as an institution. Government and employees support governmental measures that allow individuals to balance work and family obligations. Some aspects of Spanish culture are diverse from Anglo-Saxon culture and thus may shape a different standpoint to work-life balance.

First at all, demographic changes in Spain are highlighting the importance of work-life balance. Among others, the increasing percentage of women working is one the circumstances that may influence on work-family conflict (De Luis et al., 2004). Women have changed their priorities, wanting to finish their studies and participating in the labour market. Spain has one a high growth rate of female labour participation (50 per cent in 2008, when this study was conducted), but this rate is low comparing with male labour participation. Nevertheless, these trends are only recent ones and overall number of women in the workforce remains relatively low compared with other western countries. These changes contribute to both inter-generational and gender-role conflicts (Poelmans et al. 2003). Society is fast changing, but conventional views of the expected roles of women and men have been slower to change (Broadbridge, 2009).

Working hours in Spain are typically from nine to seven or eight, with a long lunch break. This time frame would increase incidences of work-life conflicts, because it does not fit with children schedules in schools or other leisure activities. The long-hours culture persists in Spain and legal regulation appear to have had little impact on this. It is also interesting to consider time management and its use in Spain, as well as how time is assigned to the most habitual tasks according to Eurostat and INE's data. Spanish women spend almost five hours daily on domestic chores, while men only dedicate one hour and half to household tasks. Women have to attempt to jungle the two domains of work and home when traditional division of labour is still in existence

(Broadbridge, 2009). Today's career women are continually challenged by the demands of full-time work and the responsibilities and commitments at home. Sometimes this challenge is harder enough to make women to leave the labour market to raise children and to meet other family responsibilities; and when they try to return to the labour market after child rearing, women experience more difficulty finding a position than do their male counterparts (De Luis et al., 2004). According to this scene, the average number of children per woman in Spain decreases to 1.38 in 2010 (1.6 in the EU), and there is a delay in maternity.

Moreover, the use of family-friendly policies is very unusual (not to mention recent) among Spanish organisations compared with organisations in other Western countries. Additionally, Spain has the lowest level of financial aid to families with children in the European Union. This context does not help to achieve work-life balance, and some of the consequences are a decrease of fertility rates, the presence of obstacles to the promotion of married women in spite of having children or the double shift for women at home an the workplace mentioned previously (De Luis et al., 2004).

Finally, at the time this research was conducted the global recession of 2008/2009 affected Spanish companies intensely. Spain is been experiencing very rough after-shocks since the economic crisis, suffering a financial hard time and a rising unemployment rate (17.4% in the first quarter of 2009 when the data were collected). At that time, the Spanish economy was facing a severe housing market correction, an industrial slump, a banking crisis and the expectations were dreadful. The economic situation does not help to consider work-life as relevant as it should be, because organizations are facing urgent problems that could affect their survival.

Institutional pressures

While rational models assume that organizational practices are universal regardless of national borders, institutionalism is sensitive to possible national differences. These differences should generate different management practices in different countries.

To examine the effects of the institutional environment in a systematic way, Kostova and Roth (2002) introduce the concept "institutional profile", as the issue specific set of regulatory, cognitive and normative institutions in a given country, which Scott (1995) called pillars. These institutions reflect different facets of the same institutional environment, invoking different types of motivation: coercive, mimetic and normative. Through these coercive, mimetic and normative process organizations adopt structures, programs, policies and procedures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These practices are adopted for legitimacy reasons and not necessarily for efficiency reasons (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Tolbert and Zucker (1996) suggested three basic stages in an institutional process. The first one, preinstitutionalization, is characterized by few adopters and a limited knowledge about the practice. The following stage is semi-institutionalization, when the diffusion is greater and the practice has gained some degree of normative acceptance. The practice is not yet established and may be consider a fad (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Finally, the last stage, full institutionalization, refers to the moment at the practice is taken for granted by a social group as efficacious and necessary.

Previous studies consider that the diffusion of work-life policies in Spain was its infancy, expecting that institutional pressures were negligible (Poelmanset al., 2003) Nevertheless, we propose that Spanish context has suffered a mayor renovation during last decade, expecting that

these pressures have become relevant. The rise of the work-life balance in the Spanish context is clear, as reflected by the increased attention being paid to this phenomenon from different perspectives. Considering the diffusion of work-life practices in Spain as an isomorphic process, we assume that it would be at one of the first stages and the institutional environment may exert direct institutional pressures on the employers to promote work-life balance. As a result of the social and political changes, we believe that institutional pressures on employers in the Spanish context have intensified. On that basis, it should be relevant to analyze the coercive, mimetic and normative pressures exerted on Spanish employers to improve work-life balance. The relationship between coercive, mimetic and normative pressures and the offer and use of work-life benefits have been discussed elsewhere, considering institutional forces as antecedents, with some other moderator factors (Pasamar & Valle, 2011).

The regulatory component reflects the existing laws and rules in a particular national environment that promote specific behaviors and restrict others (Kostova, 1999). Coercive isomorphism occurs when organizational patters are imposed by a powerful authority, basically the government in the case of work-life balance. The Organic Law 2/2007 for the effective equality between men and women cites in its preamble the unbalance relationship as an impediment to achieving real equality, and includes new benefits for employees as an extension of the paternity leave. Public employees have a wider work-life program including an extension of some of the benefits established at the general labour law. But this legislation is still recent, and literature has considered that the Spanish Government enforces or encourages relatively few in comparison with other European countries work/family arrangements (Poelmans et al., 2003).

Taking into account the cognitive component, it refers to the widely shared social knowledge and cognitive categories as stereotypes and preconceptions used by people in a given country that influence the way a particular phenomenon is categorized and interpreted (Kostova & Roth, 2002). Mimetic isomorphism occur when an organization adopt the pattern of other competitors, mainly successful organizations. The diffusion of work-life programmes has only recently started in Spain, but organizations could now be attentive to what a competitor is offering to their employees. The prevalence of a practice in the organization's industry and the perceived success of organizations within the same industry that have adopted the practice in this sector would be relevant to consider the mimetic pressure (Teo et al., 2003).

The normative component reflects values, beliefs, norms and assumptions about human nature and human behaviour held by individuals in a country (Kostova & Roth, 2002). When an organization adopts patterns considered appropriate in the environment is a way to respond normative pressures.

From an institutional perspective favourable environment would be "those that contribute in a positive way to the adoption of a practice through regulations, laws, and rules supporting and/or requiring the practice; cognitive structures that help people understand and interpret the practice correctly; and social norm enforcing the practice" (Kostova & Roth, 2002; 218).

Methodology

Population and sample

A survey was conducted to explore empirically how Spanish executives perceive the institutional pressures to improve work-life balance. Our population includes organizations from two different

industries: food and drink industry (CNAE Code 15) and Information Technology companies (IT companies, CNAE Code 72).

Data were collected via a survey of 993 HR managers from private Spanish companies with more than 50 employees. Telephone contact was established with all companies in the sample to explain the purpose of the research. Finally, 146 correctly completed questionnaires were collected, representing a sampling error of 7.5% for a confidence interval of 95%. Data were collected between September 2008 and January 2009.

The questionnaire was addressed to HR managers as they are best suited to observe the variables analysed, they have the necessary knowledge, and these managers can act as change agents in corporate decisions to adopt work-life benefits (Peters & Heusinkveld, 2010).

Identification and measurement of variables

As a starting point, we have used measures proposed by Kostova and Roth (2002) for the institutional profile, which allows us to employ previously validated scales, and a consistent analysis of the three types of institutional pressures. These scales were adapted and supplemented with items from other authors (Teo et al., 2003) to develop our final measuring instruments. Coercive, mimetic and normative pressure measurements consisted of 4, 5 and 6 items, respectively, using a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Pasamar & Valle, 2011).

The scales created for institutional pressures were validated through exploratory factor analysis. To consider measurement reliability and validity, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with EQS 6.1 using the maximum likelihood method. The factor loadings were all

significant and exceeded the critical value of 0.5 for adequate individual item reliability. We computed both Cronbach's α coefficient and composite reliability to assess scale reliability. Normative pressure results a two-dimensional construct: the first dimension refers to the general pressure experienced by all companies (normative global pressure), while the second one reflects the perception of a particular, specific and differentiated form of pressure that each company would experience (particular normative pressure).

The results obtained for coercive, mimetic and normative pressure are highly satisfactory. It allow us to confirm that the different dimensions were measured adequately using the scales listed in the questionnaire (Pasamar & Valle, 2011).

Clustering organizations by perceived institutional pressures

To examine whether there existed any significant attitudinal differences between the respondents, the score of the institutional pressures identified were cluster-analyzed. As shown in Table 1, three valid clusters were derived from analysis: (1) Low perception; (2) Medium perception; (3) High perception. Anova anaylsis confirms that the differences between groups are significant (See table 2).

Table 1. Cluster analysis of the Institutional Pressures

	Coercive Pressures	Mimetic Pressures	Global normative pressures	Particular Normative Pressures	No. (%) of respondents
Cluster 1 (Low perception: APATHETIC)	2.0481	2.5577	4.3526	2.1635	52 (35,62%)
Cluster 2 (Medium perception: OBSERVER)	3.4762	3.6561	5.1058	3.9048	63 (43,15%)
Cluster 3	3.8548	4.1720	6.0430	5.9194	31 (21,23%)

(High perception: CONCERNED)					

Table 2. Anova analysis

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Coercive Pressure	Between groups	83,724	2	41,862	33,832	,000
	Within groups	176,941	143	1,237		
	Total	260,664	145			
Mimetic Pressure	Between groups	59,407	2	29,703	33,384	,000
	Within groups	127,236	143	,890		
	Total	186,642	145			
Global Normative Pressure	Between groups	56,032	2	28,016	27,441	,000
	Within groups	145,996	143	1,021		
	Total	202,027	145			
Particular Normative Pressure	Between groups	278,080	2	139,040	221,319	,000
	Within groups	89838	143	,628		
	Total	367,918	145			

The three resulting groups of organizations and their characteristics (See Table 3) will now be described:

Group 1: Low perception of Institutional Pressures: Apathetic

In this group the perception of institutional pressures is very low, always under the central point (4) unless for the global normative pressure. Remarkably, the coercive pressure has an average score of 2.04, which means that the HR managers don't feel the strength of the law encouraging them to promote work-life balance. We labelled this group as ''Apathetic'', considering that they do not feel involved to work-life balance.

Most of the companies from the food and drink industry are located at this group, as well as those companies without presence of women in their workforce or their managerial team.

These companies offer a very low range of work-life benefits. The more common practices are the possibility of leaving the job in case of family emergency and a variable working hour, as some employees can choose the time to start and finish their works, always than they complete the full workday. All the benefits offered to the employees are limited to a very specific group of workers, so there is not a really family-friendly culture at these companies.

Table 3.Some characteristic of the three clusters

	Low Perception: APATHETIC	Medium Perception: OBSERVER	High perception: CONCERNED
Industry			
Food and drinks	45.35%	34.88%	19.77%
IT companies	21.67%	55.00%	23.33%
Female workers			
None	100%	0%	0%
1-25%	45.95%	37.84%	16.22%
26-50%	31.03%	37.93%	31.03%
51-75%	23.53%	64.71%	11.76%
More than 75%	46.67%	33.33%	20.00%
Female managers			
None	52.50%	37.50%	10.00%
1-25%	37.33%	21.33%	41.33%
26-50%	4.76%	47.62%	47.62%

More than 50%	20.00%	10.00%	70.00%
Internal plan to achieve equality			
No	39.53%	41.86%	18.60%
Yes	5.88%	41.18%	52.94%
Improving collective agreement			
No	41.67%	44.44%	13.89%
Yes	18.42%	39.47%	42.11%

Group 2: Medium perception of Institutional Pressures: Observer

In this group the perception of institutional pressures is still under the central value, except for the global normative pressure again. The coercive pressure is still the lower one, and the particular normative pressure has increase to 3.90. We labelled this group as "Observer", considering that these companies at least are beginning to think about work-life balance, and how the environment is asking them a response.

Most of the IT companies are located at this group, and the presence of internal plan for achieving equality or improving collective agreement is bigger.

These companies still offer a low range of work-life benefits. The more common practices are the possibility of leaving the job in case of family emergency and the continuous workday, but only for some of their employees. Flexibility arrangements as telejob or the possibility to extend a maternity or paternity leave, or a sabbatical leave are out of consideration in most of cases.

Group 3: High perception of Institutional Pressures: Concerned

This is the smallest group. Companies perceive greater institutional pressures to improve work-life balance. We labelled this group as "Concerned", because these companies are really sensitive to the external forces that encourage them to promote work-life balance for their employees. Most of the companies that have developed an internal plan to achieve equality between men and

women are located at this group, which is also characterised by a greater proportion of women at the management team.

In this case, the companies offer a big range of benefits to most of the employees. All of the practices considered in this research are present in this cluster. It is remarkable the presence of telejob benefits in this group of companies.

Conclusions

The starting point of this article was to explore the perception of institutional pressures on Spanish employers to improve work-life balance. The cluster analysis clearly shows the existence of different groups of companies according to their perception of coercive pressures, mimetic and normative for balance, and the different characteristics of the groups. Based on our findings, we posit that the perception of institutional pressures determine the position of the company with regard to work-life balance. We have contributed to the literature by furthering understanding of the factors at environment level that contribute to the employer involvement in work-life balance. Different perceptions of the external pressures settle on different work-life benefits offered and used by employees,

Spanish companies are very little family –friendly, and only very recently the Spanish Government has adopted measures to improve balance (De Luis, 2004). Government policies are implemented at the employer level, and it can be difficult to legislate workplace culture changes (Kossek et al. 2010). The diffusion of work-life policies in Spain has begun, but there are still much to do. Society, government, employers and employees have to assume their commitment and their involvement to work-life balance. Most of the companies analysed in this research have

just began to consider harmonising work and non work activities, and it should be necessary to prioritize these tasks to finally remove work-life balance of the to-do list.

Perhaps the most important limitation of this study is the fact that we only considered two industries, focusing on organizations with more than 50 employees. Future research may analyse different companies, industries and contexts, to see whether the perceptions of institutional pressures and the resulting clusters are similar. Also, regarding data collection procedures, it would be valuable to incorporate other agents' perceptions, as other executives not devoted to Human Resource Management, or even the employees.

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