

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WORK OVERLOAD IN A PANDEMIC WORLD

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Purpose: The aim of the paper is to extend the understanding of changes in the level of work overload, work-life balance and job performance reported by employees before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the paper offers a preliminary analysis of the relationship between the abovementioned variables in these two periods.

Design/methodology/approach: The survey was conducted among employees of companies operating in different sectors. The data collected referred to periods before and during the pandemic. In total 275 questionnaires were analyzed.

Findings: Relationships between all particular variables in the periods of Time 1 and Time 2 were identified. Moreover, there are relationships between changes in the level of work overload, work-life balance and job performance. Additionally, the results show moderate relationships between work overload in T1 and T2 and work-life balance in T1 and T2 and a relationship between work-life balance in T1 and job performance in T1. Weak relationships were revealed for work overload in T2 and job performance in T2, and work-life balance in T1 and T2 and job performance in T2.

Research limitations/implications: The main limitation is the design of the study which relies on retrospection for T1. The other limitation refers to preliminary analyses.

Social implications: The research may help to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work-life balance of employees.

Originality/value: The paper presents data on work overload, work-life balance and job performance that relate to two time periods. The research opens an avenue for further research on this topic.

Keywords: work-life balance, work overload, job performance.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Although WLB is a major concern for societies across the world in the modern organizational setting, employees are increasingly reporting complex work demands and work overload (Poulose, Dhal, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations

implemented remote work for their employees, which led to the blurring of boundaries between work and family life. It forced employees to respond to family demands while maintaining job performance at the same time (Ortiz-Bonnin et al., 2022). The boundaries between work and non-work domains were significantly blurred in 2020 when the governments of many countries introduced lockdowns. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted not only in health and economic problems, but also influenced people's personal lives and roles within families. The closure of schools, public institutions, and workplaces affected many people (Bjarnadóttir, Hjalmsdóttir, 2021). Many employees still needed to go to the workplace which entailed a reorganization of their lives due to the closure of day-care centers/schools and the need to comply with strict safety guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus (Ortiz-Bonnin et al., 2022). One of the most unexpected effects of lockdown turned out to be the intensification of the problem of caring for children, especially as working parents were involved in educating children. It also turned out that many working parents either could not provide this care freely in the case of children not much older than eight, or had to combine remote work with childcare (Godlewska-Bujok, 2020).

In their qualitative research on a sample of UK academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, Adisa et al. (2022) have discovered that many of them experienced work intensification. Work overload (WO) is a critical but understudied stressor at work (Kimura et al., 2018). During the pandemic some employees spent time intended for leisure or commuting on a prolongation of working hours instead (Bellmann, Hübler, 2021). This situation may have affected the work-life balance (WLB) of employees in different ways. As Ortiz-Bonnin et al. (2022) claim, more research on satisfaction with WLB in times of crisis is needed. The results of research conducted by Narayanamurthy and Tortorella (2021) showed that the work implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have a direct negative impact on employee performance (EP). In challenging situations, individuals have to put in more effort to maintain their current performance, which is energy-depleting in the long term. The result is a decline in their performance (Parker et al., 2022). Moreover, a search of existing literature did not yield a two-wave longitudinal study that supports causal evidence for relationships between work overload, well-being and employee performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of the paper is to answer three research questions: (1) What are the changes in the levels of WO, WLP and EP experienced during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods? (2) What are the relationships between WO, WLP and EP during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods? (3) What are the relationships between changes in the level of WO, WLP and EP during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods? The research will shed light on the dynamics of the examined phenomena brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, thus contributing to the literature on WLB.

2. Work-life balance and work overload: theoretical assumptions

WLB may be simply defined as an “individual’s perception of how well his or her life roles are balanced” (Haar et al., 2014). WLB is about experiencing satisfaction and functioning effectively both at work and in the family domain by avoiding role-conflict (Clark, 2000). WLB literature is dominated by the tradition of work-life conflict. It is often described as the absence of conflict or interference between family and work (Kalliath, Brough, 2008). As Greenhaus and Allen (2011) claim, the interpretation of WLB depends upon the career and life stages, changing values and goals of individuals. According to the cited authors, individuals experience WLB when their role expectations and role effectiveness are consistent with their prevailing life priorities.

WBL reflects an individual’s orientation across different life roles and for this reason is often explained by role theory. The underlying assumption of role theory is that an individual’s life is comprised of several roles and the responsibilities that follow roles at work may be hard to reconcile (Berglund et al., 2021). WLB is also explained through the prism of boundary theory which focuses the dynamics of transition from one life domain to another, thus facilitating the understanding of how an individual creates and manages the boundary between work and the family domain. These boundaries are physical, temporal and psychological (Clark, 2000). In order to ensure that WLB research is more aligned with contemporary social trends, Matthew et al. (2010) applied the conservation of resources (COR) framework. They suggested that in order to achieve WLB, people attempt to manage diverse personal pursuits and expend their finite personal resources (e.g., time, money, emotions and energy). According to COR, in the process of acquiring, retaining and conserving resources regardless of their environment, stress may occur and there may be a consequent risk of loss or an actual loss of such resources. Applying COR assumptions, ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) provided an extended concept – the Work-Home Resources model – that explains the interplay between the demands and resources experienced in people’s work and private life domains. They claim that contextual demands from a person’s work or family deplete the person’s contextual and/or personal resources, which decreases outcomes in either or both domains (Akanji et al., 2022).

There are many dimensions of job demands, such as time pressure, high speed of work, and the quantity of work (Skinner, Pocock, 2008). Job demands are not inherently problematic; yet an excessive number of job demands such as permanent work overload result in negative consequences (de Beer et al., 2016). One such job demand is work overload, which is defined as “the perceived magnitude of work-role demands, and the feeling that there are too many things to do and not enough time to do them” (Parasuraman et al., 1996, p. 280). Work overload arises when employees feel that there are too many responsibilities or activities expected of them considering the time available, their abilities, and other constraints. COR theory and transactional theory explain the results of WO. COR theory predicts that work overload will

lead to emotional exhaustion. As a consequence, an employee who feels overloaded will try to manage the demands on his or her time by putting in additional time and energy to perform in such an unfavorable job setting, which may lead to emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). The transactional theory of stress (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984) proposes that the individual's reaction to stress comprises two steps: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. The former is a subjective assessment of the degree to which a particular stressor poses a threat to the self, while the latter is the assessment of the controllability of the stressor and coping resources of the individual. The basic assumption of this theory is that a stressor leads to negative emotions and responses only when the perceived threat to the self exceeds an individual's perceived level of coping resources (Kimura et al., 2018).

3. Relationships between work overload, work-life balance and employee performance

For employees with extensive and overwhelming responsibilities, WLB may simply be out of the question. Excessive job demands lead to employees' emotional exhaustion while trying to deal with problems associated with conflict that arise among their work and life spheres. Work overload can lead to fewer available resources for dealing with non-work-life responsibilities or demands for employees (Caratepe, 2013). Therefore, work overload has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of work-life conflict, as it both increases work hours and also imposes strain and exhaustion. There is also evidence that workload may decrease WLB to a higher extent than work hours (Skinner, Pocock, 2008; Virick et al., 2007).

The relationship between WO and EP has not been clearly established (Kumar et al., 2021). According to the Job Demands-Resources model, high job demands such as work overload deplete employees' mental energy, and thus may result in exhaustion (Schaufelli et al., 2009). The stress associated with work overload may cause individuals to aim to accomplish only the minimum requirements of their tasks, potentially adversely affecting the overall quality of their work (Webster and Adams, 2020). Thus, work overload has been identified as a critical predictor of job performance which results in unfavorable performance outcomes (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Yet, on the other hand, for those employees who cope with demanding circumstances by putting in extra effort, the outcome may be improved performance (Kumar et al., 2021).

Finally, there is supposed to be a positive relationship between WLB and EP (Konrad and Mangel, 2000). WLB has positive effects such as higher motivation which, in turn, increases performance and productivity (Vaziri et al., 2020). In turn, a decrease in WLB increases emotional exhaustion (Lee, 2013) which is then manifested in a decline in performance.

Thus, we can expect a negative relationship between WO and WLB and between WO and EP. On the other hand, the relationship between WLB and EP should be positive. Yet these relationships are rarely examined at two points in time. There is a particular need to understand them in the context of the specific pre-pandemic and pandemic periods.

4. Research methodology

In order to answer the research questions presented in the introduction, quantitative research was conducted. The research methodology was suggested by guidelines set by Kinnunen et al. (2019). Employees working in medium-sized companies operating in Poland in different sectors completed the questionnaire, which allowed for the inclusion of employees from different professions. All variables were measured on more than two occasions. The survey was sent to respondents during the pandemic period in 2021. Respondents were asked to assess their level of WO, WLB and EP before and during the pandemic. A seven-item scale of WO (Shantz et al., 2016), WLB (Brough et al., 2014) and EP (Williams, Anderson, 1991) was used. Cronbach's alpha tests were conducted to see if multiple-question Likert scale surveys were reliable. The consistency coefficient of the scales was above 0.8. In total, 275 of 380 questionnaires sent were analyzed.

5. Results

Means, standard deviations, and percentage distribution of variables are presented in Table 1. These statistics enable the authors to answer the first research question pertaining to the changes in examined variables. The mean of the declared level for analyzed variables was similar in the periods T1 and T2. Yet there were respondents who observed an increase or decrease in WO, WLB and EP. The most observable increase was for work overload (31.84% of indications) and a decrease in WLB (28.68%). Almost one-fifth of employees noticed a decrease in performance.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics

Variable	T1 before pandemic		T2 in pandemic		Distribution of variables		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	No changes %	Decrease %	Increase %
WO	3.55	1.21	3.68	1.29	50.27%	17.89%	31.84%
WLB	4.50	1.39	4.41	1.44	53.43%	28.68%	17.89%
EP	5.81	0.93	5.77	1.03	65%	19.21%	15.79%

Source: own study.

The next step was to calculate if the changes in the level of analyzed variables were significant. Paired Samples t-tests were used to examine the differences between T1 and T2 for each of the examined variables (Table 2, Table 3). Although there was a high level of correlation between dependent pairs of variables in the periods T1 and T2, a paired t-test revealed that the mean difference between these pairs equaled zero, i.e., the differences between the mean values in the periods T1 and T2 were not statistically significant.

Table 2.
Correlations between paired samples

Pairs of variables	N	Correlation coefficient	Significance (one-way p)	Significance (two-way p)
WO1T & WOT2	275	0.72	<.001	<.001
WLBT1 & WLBT2	275	0.63	<.001	<.001
EPT1 & EPT2	275	0.83	<.001	<.001

Source: own study.

Table 3
T-test for the dependent samples

Pairs of variables	Paired sample differences					t	df	p	
	M	SD	Mean standard error	95% confidence interval for paired sample differences				One-way p	Two-way p
				Lower limit	Upper limit				
WO1T & WOT2	-0.12	0.94	0.06	-0.23	-0.01	-2.14	274.00	0.02	0.03
WLBT1 & WLBT2	0.09	1.23	0.07	-0.06	0.24	1.22	274.00	0.11	0.22
EPT1 & EPT2	0.04	0.58	0.03	-0.03	0.11	1.07	274.00	0.14	0.29

Source: own study.

To answer RQ3, a new variable was created, as a difference in values between the variable measured in periods T2 and T1. The next step was to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient for T1–T2 changes for all variables. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 4.
Intraclass correlation coefficients

	ICC	95% confidence interval for paired sample differences		F-Snedecor test			
		Lower limit	Upper limit	F-value	df1	df2	p-value
WO1T & WOT2 Cronbach's Alpha .837							
Unit parameters	.720	0.658	0.773	6.153	274	274	0.00
Mean parameters	.837	0.794	0.872	6.153	274	274	0.00
WLBT1 & WLBT2 Cronbach's Alpha .77							
Unit parameters	.626	0.549	0.693	4.352	274	274	0
Mean parameters	.770	0.709	0.819	4.352	274	274	0
EPT1 & EPT2 Cronbach's Alpha .908							
Unit parameters	.831	0.791	0.865	10.858	274	274	0
Mean parameters	.908	0.883	0.927	10.858	274	274	0

Source: own study.

The results of the above analyses made it possible to form a new group of variables (the WO, WLB, and EP change variables) by subtracting the T1 values of these effectiveness measures from their T2 equivalents. To calculate correlations between variables in the period T1, period T2 and changes between T2 and T1, standardization of variables was undertaken using the Weber standardization method. The results of correlation analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 .
Pearson correlation coefficients

	WOT1	WOT2	WOT2- WOT1	WLBT1	WLBT2	WLBT2- WLBT1	EPT1	EPT2	EPT2- EPT1
WOT1	--								
WOT2	.720**	--							
WOT2-WOT1	-.295**	.450**	--						
WLBT1	-.487**	-.354**	.139*	--					
WLBT2	-.313**	-.505**	-.293**	.626**	--				
WLBT2-WLBT1	.186**	-.190**	-.502**	-.402**	.462**	--			
EPT1	-.141*	-.157**	-0.034	.304**	.195**	-0.117	--		
EPT2	-0.094	-.236**	-.204**	.194**	.209**	0.025	.831**	--	
EPT2-EPT1	.60	-.168**	-.309**	-.145*	.058	.233**	-.132*	.441**	--

*p<.05; **p<.01.

Relationships between T2-T1 variables and variables measured in T1 and T2 are in italics.

Source: own study.

The analysis of data from Table 5 enables one to observe a relationship between all particular variables measured in T1 and T2 (e.g., between WOT1 and WOT2). The strongest relationship was between EPT2-EPT1 (.831) and the weakest for WLBT2-WLBT1 (.626). Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis enabled the authors to confirm the suggested relationships between three examined phenomena. Looking for at least a moderate relationship, we may observe a negative relationship between WO and WLB for both T1 and T2 (-.487 and -.505 respectively). Also, changes in the level of WO in the periods T2 and T1 are related to the level of WLBT2 (-.293). The correlation coefficient for the relationship between WOT1 and WLBT2 is **-.313****. The relationship between WO and EP could only be observed in Time 2 (-.236). The relationship between WLB and EP is positive: the correlation coefficient for the pair WLBT1-EPT1 is .304, and for WLBT2-EPT2 it is .209. There is also a weak correlation between WLBT1 and EPT2 (.194). Taking into consideration relationships between changes in the level of examined variables in the periods T2 and T1, there are moderate correlations between all particular variables. The correlation coefficients are as follows: - .502 for WOT2-WOT1 and WLBT2-WLBT1; **-.309**** for EPT2-EPT1 and WOT2-WOT1; **.233**** for EPT2-EPT1 and WLBT2-WLBT1.

6. Conclusions

This study presents preliminary analyses aimed at a greater understanding of the dynamics of WO, WLB and EP before and during the pandemic period. Several conclusions stem from the research. First, the level of work overload increased, while the level of WLB and EP decreased on average; yet there were some employees who reported the reverse. For the majority of respondents, the perception of WLB, WO and EP in the periods before and during the pandemic was stable. Additionally, the study also revealed that there is a relationship between all variables measured in T1 and T2, i.e. WOT1 and WOT2, WLBT1 and WLBT2, and EPT1 and EPT2. Similar relationships between work-role overload and work-to-family/family-to-work conflict in T1 and T2 were reported by Matthews et al. (2014). The strongest correlation was between WOT2-WOT1 and WLBT2-WLBT1; thus, changes in the level of WO are connected with changes in perceived WLB. The study was focused on understanding relationships between different variables in T1 and T2. It is worth noting that changes between levels of all variables in T1 and T2 were correlated. The results show that there is a moderate relationship between WO and WLB. WLB is also related to changes in the levels of WO. It is interesting to note that the relationship between WLB and EP is weaker in T2 than in T1. This may mean that, in terms of performance, it was not as important to achieve WLB; yet this assumption requires further examination. Perhaps due to certain other factors such as job insecurity, the expectations of employees in regard to WLB decreased. WO was related to EP only in T2. Thus, the results obtained support the previous results in terms of relationships between examined variables at a particular point in time, and may potentially lead to a greater understanding of the possible impact of variables in T1 and T2.

The main limitation of the study is the retrospective character of the research in the context of the period T1. Although the respondents assessed the measured variables for the T2 pandemic situation, they also referred to a point in time which was approximately one year earlier. The other limitation is related to the statistical methods used. As mentioned, the paper presents only the preliminary analyses. For longitudinal analysis, regression analysis or structural equation modelling and testing of different models (standard, reversed, reciprocal) is needed at a minimum. The majority of measures were significantly or moderately correlated. This calls for further analysis of the interrelationships between WO, WLB and EP. Subsequent studies will analyze data collected in the period T3 (post-pandemic) using advanced statistical analyses.

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