

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND WORK LIFE-BALANCE ACROSS EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

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Purpose: The aim of this paper is to explore the link between WE and WLB at the country level in European countries.

Design/methodology/approach: The current paper uses data from several sources. The theoretical part of the paper is based on the literature review. The empirical part is based on the data collected through secondary data analysis. The secondary data were mainly collected through related research articles, reports and websites.

Findings: The main finding of the research is that there are differences between EU countries in terms of both levels of work engagement and work-life balance. European employees are the most satisfied with the level of work-life balance and at the same time they are the least engaged compared to other regions of the world. One explanation for the low level of engagement with a high level of work-life balance indicator is the inadequate leadership in European companies.

Research limitations/implications: The current paper is limited in that it only discusses the link between the levels of WE and WLB across EU countries without explaining the reasons for the relationship. Therefore, further research is needed to identify the factors that shape this mutual relation.

Practical implications: The article is interesting from the practical point of view, as low employee engagement is a significant challenge, with one in five workers worldwide planning to quit their jobs. The situation appears to be even worse in Europe, where one in three workers are considering leaving their company. For this reason it is crucial to analyze the reasons of low engagement.

Social implications: The paper refers to very important social issue of employees' well-being. It helps in better understanding the meaning of work-life balance for work engagement. It might affect the quality of life by promoting more balanced work-environment and the idea of corporate social responsibility.

Originality/value: Currently, studies are limited and often examine WE and WLB separately. So the novelty of the article is that the author discusses the link between WE and WLB. Additionally the article presents cross-national studies on relationship between WE and WLB. The results presented in the article can be important for the scientific discussion on the cross-country differences in WE and WLB.

Keywords: work-life balance, work engagement, EU countries.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Work engagement is a term that is defined in various ways in the literature leading to a conceptual confusion with regard to the meaning of the term. The literature uses several associated terms such as: employee engagement, work involvement, job involvement, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment either synonymously or non-synonymously to define engagement (Iddagoda, Opatha, 2015). Some authors use the terms interchangeably (Luthans, Perterson, 2002; Robertson, Cooper 2009; Guest 2014). Others believe that employee engagement, work involvement, job involvement, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior or organizational commitment are not the same ideas (Saks, 2006; Robbins, Judge, 2013; Armstrong, 2009). For the purposes of this paper the author assumes that the terms: ‘work engagement’ and ‘employee engagement in job’ are synonyms closely linked to job/work involvement and satisfaction as well as with organizational commitment and behavior.

Work engagement means ‘a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind’ (Schaufeli, Bakker, Salanova, 2006, p. 702) and is ‘ (...) something given by employee which can benefit the organisation through commitment and dedication, advocacy, discretionary effort, using talents to the fullest and being supportive of the organisation’s goals and values’ (Robertson-Smith, Markwick, 2009, p. V). Engaged employees are those who are involved in, enthusiastic and satisfied with work (Seigts, Crim, 2006; Harter, Schmidt, Hayes, 2002). However there are three levels of employee engagement: engaged, not-engaged and actively disengaged (Figure 1).

engaged	not-engaged	actively disengaged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with passion • feel a connection to the company they work for • drive innovation • move organization forward • have an intention to stay with the company for a long term • client oriented • go an extra mile in-order to achieve organizational goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • put time but not energy or passion into work • do what they need to but nothing more • do not identify with the organization or the team • if there is another offer of the job the employee is ready to quit the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unhappy at work • act out their unhappiness to others • do not identify with the organization or the team • is ready to leave the organization as soon as possible

Figure 1. Levels of employee engagement.

Source: own study based on (Gallup, 2006; Iddagoda, Opatha, 2015).

Moreover, to foster engagement, a reciprocal relationship between the organization and employees is necessary (Markos, Sridevi, 2010). It is important to note that engagement is mutually beneficial for both employees and organizations. The table 1 presented below outlines the most prevalent advantages of engagement.

Table 1.

Advantages of engagement for employees and organizations

Advantages for employees	Advantages for organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decreases burnout syndrome, • reduces stress and feeling of anger at work, • creates the feeling of belonging in the workplace, • creates the feeling that the work is valued, • creates the intent to stay in the company, • may enable individuals to invest themselves fully in their work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engagement is a strategic asset and a source of competitive advantage, • higher productivity, • lower turnover at the employee level, • increased customer satisfaction, • reduced employee absenteeism, • increases organizational profit, • higher employee loyalty, • employees act as advocates of the organization.

Source: own study.

Employee engagement is crucial for long-term retention and has a significant impact on organisational productivity, profit, and turnover. Therefore, it is an essential aspect of modern human resources management. However, the question remains: how can organisations create a high level of employee engagement while also maintaining a healthy work-life balance? Research indicates that engagement may have positive health effects and positive feelings towards work and the organisation (Mauno, Kinnunen, Ruokolainen, 2007; Rothbard, 2001). However, work engagement can also lead to work-family conflicts as it requires time and energy. Therefore, work-life balance is an important factor associated with work engagement (Björk-Fant, Bolander, Forsman, 2023).

In recent years, there has been a great deal of attention directed towards the well-being of employees. Work-life balance refers to the 'overall interrole assessment of compatibility between work and family roles' (Allen, 2013, p. 703). The aim of working individuals is to achieve a balance between work and other spheres of their lives (Burke, 2023). Consequently, research into the areas of employee work engagement and work-life balance has gained increasing interest in the fields of human resource management.

2. Method

The concepts of work engagement (WE) and work-life balance (WLB) are not entirely new, as many researchers have conducted theoretical and empirical studies on both. However, the relationship between WE and WLB is not clear. Some authors suggest that WE is an antecedent of WLB, while others argue that WLB is a key factor in WE. Additionally there

is a great need for cross-national studies on relationship between WE and WLB. Currently, studies are limited and often examine WE and WLB separately. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explore the link between WE and WLB at the country level in European countries.

This paper analyses the relationship between work engagement (WE) and work-life balance (WLB) based of the literature. It discusses the empirical evidence of WE and WLB in Europe Union (EU), and analyses the relationship between WE and WLB in EU countries.

The current paper uses data of multiple sources. The theoretical part of this paper is based on a literature review with the Web of Science Core Collection, EBESCO and SpringerLink databases serving as the main sources. The author conducted a topic search between September and November 2023 to identify publications related to the phrases ‘work engagement’, ‘employee engagement and ‘work-life balance’. The empirical section is based on the data collected from the secondary sources, including research articles, reports, and websites.

3. Results

3.1. Work engagement and its relations with work-life balance – the literature review

Multiple studies suggest that WE and WLB are related to each other. For example Sivapragasam and Raya (2017) showed that employee well-being has an influence on employee engagement. In another study the relationship between well-being and job commitment of an employee was explored (Harter, Schmidt, Hayes, 2002; Wright, 2006). Therefore, the issue of work-life balance is receiving a great attention as it helps to promote employees’ well-being. A deeper understanding of the relationship between work engagement (WE) and work-life balance (WLB) is necessary to comprehend these two concepts better. The table 2 provides an overview of some of the research conducted on WE and WLB.

Table 2.

The overview of research on WE and WLB

Research field	Authors	The main findings
WLB to work engagement directional focus		
Organizational climate/ organizational culture/ organizational policy	Joshi, Sodhi (2011)	WLB, job content, monetary benefits, team orientation are important drivers of WE
	Evans, Redfern (2010)	WLB, communication, remuneration support the creation of WE
	Peeters et al. (2009)	Supportive work-family culture enhances WE and reduces burnout
	Mauno (2010)	There is a link between managerial work-family support and WE
	Scanlan et al. (2012)	Family-friendly policy develop WLB and is associated with lower turnover and WE
	Fiksenbaum (2014)	Availability of work-family benefits promotes work-family culture while work-family conflict contributes negatively to work-family culture and in consequence to WE
	Itam, Singh (2012)	There is a positive correlation between work and personal life, stress and training, and WE

Cont. table 2.

Accumulation/ enrichment of resources	Timms et al. (2015)	Positive experiences of work that contribute to a positive mood and sense of confidence in family life are associated with WE
	Chen, Powell (2012)	WLB helps to be more engaged in work through work-family role enrichment
Work-family conflict Family-work conflict	Montgomery et al. (2003)	Work-home demands create a pressure and decrease WE, while availability of work-home resources brings greater WE
	Rothbard(2001)	Multiple demands of work and family affect the fulfilment of roles negatively due to limited amount of employee's time and energy
	Li et al. (2014)	Social support has a positive effect on WE with moderating effect of proactive personality, while work-family conflict has a negative effect on WE
	Opie, Hemm (2013)	Personality plays role in moderating the relationship between work-family conflict and WE
Well-being	Chambel (2017)	Part-time work helps to prevent burnout and promotes well-being (also WE) at work
Work engagement to WLB directional focus		
Organizational climate/ organizational culture/ organizational policy	Chen, Huang (2016)	Charismatic leadership style, team support, self-esteem are important indicators of WE, which, in turn, has a positive relationship with innovative behavior and work-family conflict
Accumulation/ enrichment of resources	Culberston et al. (2012)	Daily WE has a positive effect on family life (the effect is moderated by work-family capitalization, or the sharing of positive work experiences)
	Karatepe, Demir (2014)	Employees who are engaged at work are more capable of integrating their work (family) and family (work) roles with success
	Marais (2014)	There is a mediating relationship between work resources and WE, while family-work enrichment mediates the relationship between home resources and family engagement
	Ilies et al. (2017)	Individuals' daily WE experiences relate positively to work-family interpersonal capitalization, which, in turn, relate positively to satisfaction from family life and to work-family balance
	Chen, Powell (2012)	Work role engagement affects work role resources gains positively and in consequence leads to work-to-family enrichment
Work-family conflict Family-work conflict	Bakker (2012, 2014)	Work-related overload affect home domain and then crosses over to the partner through social interaction. WE is positively related to work-family facilitation, and this in turn, leads to higher employee's/partner's family satisfaction
	Rantanen et al. (2013)	Over-engagement (high weekly working hours, insufficient personal time) is related to harmful levels of work-family conflict
	Chernyak-Hai, Tziner (2016)	WE is statistically and positively associated with the risk of burnout and higher experiences of work-family conflict
	Halbesleben et al. (2009)	Highly engaged employees have lower levels of work-family conflict
Well-being	Burke et al. (2013)	WE is related to job satisfaction and lower levels of role conflicts

Source: own study based on: (Wood, Oh, Park, Kim, 2020).

In summary, a body of literature has examined the relationship between WE and WE constructs. Some of the researchers highlight that WLB could be analyzed as the antecedent of work engagement while others present the correlative influences of work engagement and WLB. The analysis identifies various fields of the research on WE and WLB relations, including organizational culture (policies, procedures, systems and structures), accumulation/enrichment of resources perspective (work-family enrichment, family-work

enrichment), roles conflict perspective (work-family conflict, family-work conflict, burnout) and well-being (job satisfaction, life satisfaction, health). To improve understanding of the issue of WE, it is important to consider the perspective of work-life balance (WLB) and vice versa. Research has shown that highly engaged employees are more satisfied with their family life and experience fewer role conflicts.

3.2. Work engagement and work life balance across EU – the key findings

Work engagement in European Union countries

In 2021, only 14% of European employees were engaged at work, compared to the global average of 21% (Gallup, 2022). The situation in Europe has worsened in 2022, with only 13% of workers being engaged, compared to the global average of 23% (Gallup, 2023). Furthermore, there are significant differences in engagement levels across the world. The most engaged employees are from the USA and Canada, while the least engaged are from Europe (table 3).

Table 3.

The level of employee engagement

Ranking	Region	Engaged in 2022 (%)	Engaged in 2023 (%)
1	United States and Canada	33	31
2	South Asia	27	33
3	Southeast Asia	24	26
4	Latin American and the Caribbean	23	31
5	Sub-Saharan Africa	21	20
6	Commonwealth of Independent States	20	27
7	East Asia	17	17
8	Australia and New Zealand	17	23
9	Middle East and North Africa	15	15
10	Europe	14	13

Source: based on: (Gallup, 2022; 2023).

Table 4 shows that work engagement is related not only to the region of the world but also to other factors such as age, job level, work location, and gender.

Table 4.

The level of employee engagement depending on age, job level, work location, gender and country

	Global	Europe
The average level of engagement	23%	13%
Age	<40 – 23% >40 – 24%	<40 – 13% >40 – 13%
Job level	Managers 31% Individual contributors 20%	Managers 17% Individual contributors 11%
Work location	Fully remote 30% Hybrid 24% On-site 21%	Fully remote 15% Hybrid 12% On-site 13%
Gender	Female 25% Male 22%	Female 13% Male 13%
Country	The highest engagement: Mali 47% The lowest engagement: Japan 5%, Italy 5%	The highest engagement: Romania 35% The lowest engagement: Italy 5%

Source: Based on: (Gallup, 2023).

The data indicates that managers and fully remote workers are the most engaged employees. Additionally, women tend to be more engaged than men on a global scale. However, there is a lower level of employee engagement in Europe across all demographics when compared to global indicators. It is worth noting that both European men and women, as well as younger and older employees, exhibit similarly low levels of engagement. On the other hand, significant disparities can be observed among European countries. For instance, over one-third of Romanians are engaged, while only 5% of Italians are engaged.

Low employee engagement is a significant challenge, with one in five workers worldwide planning to quit their jobs, according to The Best Workplaces. The situation appears to be even worse in Europe, where one in three workers are considering leaving their company (table 5). Low engagement has a significant impact on the global economy, costing \$7.8 trillion.

Table 5.

Likelihood that respondents will leave their current jobs in the next 3-6 months

Country	Likelihood %
Poland	50
France	35
Switzerland	34
Spain	32
Portugal	30
Italy	29
Germany	28
Belgium	27
Austria	26

Source: based on: (McKinsey, 2022).

Work-life balance in European Union countries

The work-life balance is a crucial aspect of EU policy. The European Pillar of Social Rights (European commission, 2021) and the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers emphasize the importance of improving the work-life balance of parents and carers. The directive aims to promote equality between men and women in terms of labor market opportunities, equal treatment at work, and promoting a high level of employment in the EU by making it easier for working parents and carers to balance work and private life (Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej RPO). The labour market situation is monitored through various surveys, including the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), the European Enterprise Survey (EES), and the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. The surveys compare countries based on their ability to balance work and family life, flexible working arrangements, and the provision of high-quality care services. The most recent research, conducted in 2021, focused primarily on the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and working conditions. The report's key findings, according to Burke (2022), are as follows:

1. 81% of European employees (from 27 EU countries) confirm that their working hours fitted in with family and social commitments outside work (the Dutch reported the best while Romanian reported the poorest fit between work and commitment outside work).
2. Women more often than men reported that their work-life balance is good.
3. The fit between working hours and family/social commitments differed by occupation, sector and employment status.
4. People working from home enjoyed better work-life balance than people working on-site.
5. Employees aged 35-44 years old perceived their work-life balance as poor, while the best work-life balance was observed for people aged 56 and older.
6. Having children increases the share of respondents (both women and men) reporting poor work-life balance.
7. 27% of all European employees suffer from work-life conflict.
8. 24% of respondents are always or very often too tired to fulfill household duties.

In summary, the report indicates that employees from the European Union continue to experience work-life imbalance and conflict. The research suggests that employees who experience lower levels of tension and have greater resources available are more likely to report that their professional and personal lives are in alignment. Therefore, the quality of work and the balance between work and personal life are interdependent. Additionally, conflicts that arise at the intersection of work and personal life can be mitigated by providing more resources, as employees are less likely to think about work outside of working hours and feel less fatigued from their roles.

4. Discussion

In 2011 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) created so called the Better Life Index as a part of the Better Life Initiative that allows understanding ‘what drives the well-being of people and nations and what needs to be done to achieve greater progress for all’ (OECD). The index is based on 11 topics: housing, income, jobs community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance. Work-life balance is considered an essential indicator of living conditions and quality of life. The work-life balance index is based on the length of working hours (the amount of time that people spent on work) and time devoted to leisure and personal care. The table 6 presents the ranking for 22 out of 27 EU countries in 2020, as well as the level of employee engagement in the European Union for 2020 and 2022.

Table 6.*EU countries ranked highest for the quality of their work-life balance in 2020*

Country	Work-life balance index in 2020	Engagement in 2020 (%)	Engagement in 2022 (%)
Austria	6	10	11
Belgium	7.7	12	11
Czechia	7	16	15
Denmark	8.6	20	20
Estonia	7.3	24	25
Finland	7.3	10	14
France	8.1	7	7
Germany	8	15	16
Greece	7	9	12
Hungary	7.6	19	21
Ireland	6.2	13	11
Italy	9.4	5	5
Latvia	7.5	17	24
Lithuania	7.7	19	25
Luxemburg	7.4	8	10
Netherlands	8.3	12	14
Poland	6.5	12	14
Portugal	6.7	18	19
Slovak	7.1	13	17
Slovenia	6.7	16	16
Spain	8.4	8	10
Sweden	8.1	18	21

Source: based on: (OECD, 2020; Gallup, 2021; 2023).

In the OECD's Work-Life Balance Index, European countries rank highly compared to other areas of the world. Out of the 41 countries studied, the top 8 are European. Italy, Denmark, and Spain have the highest levels of work-life balance, while Austria, Ireland, and Poland have the highest imbalance. Despite Europeans rating their lives highly, with European countries topping the list of happiest places on Earth and eight of the world's happiest countries being located in Europe (Helliwell et al., 2022), they report feeling less satisfied with their workplaces than other nations (Gallup, 2022). This has resulted in low employee engagement in Europe, which varies between countries. In 2020, the highest levels of work engagement were observed in Estonia and Denmark. In 2022, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania showed the highest levels of work engagement, with Latvia and Lithuania making the most progress in the past two years. Conversely, employees in Belgium, Czechia, and Ireland were less engaged than they were two years ago. Italian and French employees consistently showed the lowest levels of work engagement.

Schaufeli's (2018) research demonstrates that engagement levels are higher in productive and economically active countries where people work less, such as Northern and Northwestern Europe, compared to less productive and active countries like Eastern and Southern Europe. Interestingly, despite having the highest work-life balance score of 9.4, Italy has the least engaged employees. However, it should be noted that Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which have highly engaged employees and a good balance between work and social/family commitments, are located in Eastern Europe. Therefore, Schaufeli's research results do not fully explain the relationship between work engagement and work-life balance in EU countries.

In turn according to Björk, Bolander, Forsman (2023) work–life balance can be associated with positive aspects of mental well-being at work, such as work engagement and the relation between WLB and WE across European countries can be explained by welfare regime. The study found that employees in the Southern Europe welfare regime, as well as and male employees in the Central and Eastern Europe welfare regime, were less likely to report satisfactory work-life balance compared to employees in the Nordic welfare regime. Again it is not fully truth for the present research, as Italy (Southern Europe) is the most work-life balanced according to OECD index, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary (Eastern Europe) and Spain (Southern Europe) are more work-life balanced than Finland (Nordic).

Consequently, a growing body of the evidence demonstrates that the relationship between work engagement (WE) and work-life balance (WLB) in European countries is influenced by factors beyond cultural, economic or political contexts. One possible explanation for the poor engagement despite high levels of work-life balance indicators in Europe is the inadequate leadership in European companies. According to a Gallup survey conducted in 2013, 97% of German managers believed they were proficient in managing their teams. However, only 69% of German employees agreed with this assessment, stating that they worked under incompetent managers. The top reasons for this perception were workload, unclear communication from managers, lack of support from managers, and time pressure. These factors contribute to unfair treatment at work, which can reduce employee engagement, regardless of work-life balance. Therefore, it is crucial to address these issues and create a supportive working environment. Work engagement is a multi-faceted construct. To create deeply engaged human resources, it is important to consider various aspects. While work-life balance is a significant issue for work engagement, it does not fully explain it. Similarly, to understand the level of work-life balance in Europe, it is not sufficient to focus solely on work engagement. Work-life balance is associated with work engagement and this association is shaped by different macro (economic, cultural, political) and micro (organizational, personal) factors.

5. Summary

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between work engagement and work-life balance among employees in the European Union. Based on the research conducted for this paper, it is evident that there is a variation in the levels of work engagement and work-life balance among EU countries. Italians report the highest level of work-life balance satisfaction, while Austrians report the lowest. Furthermore, the most engaged employees are found in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Contrary to popular belief, Italians are the least frequently

engaged in their jobs. Additionally, EU employees exhibit lower levels of engagement, but higher satisfaction with their work-life balance compared to other regions of the world.

The low employee engagement across EU countries cannot be fully explained by the welfare regime or the type of economy. This issue is complex and requires further analysis. The current paper is limited in that it only discusses the link between the levels of WE and WLB across EU countries without explaining the reasons for the relationship. Therefore, further research is needed to identify the factors that shape this mutual relation.

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