



23

Managing Work-Life Tensions: The Challenges for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs)

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Leading scholars in International Human Resource Management (IHRM) have raised awareness of the constraints and challenges related to managing a global workforce (e.g., Scullion, Collings, & Gunnigle, 2007; Sumelius, Björkman, & Smale, 2008), but discussion specific to work-life management in a global context is limited (e.g., Allen, Shockley, & Biga, 2010; De Cieri & Bardoel, 2011; Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007). Somewhat earlier, tension-centered theory emerged within the management literature (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) and, as I argue here, provides a promising framework for understanding the constraints, challenges, and opportunities associated with work-life management in multi-national enterprises (MNEs).

MNEs are central to understanding the global economy. According to the United Nations (2019), as of 2018, flows of foreign direct investment (a measure of MNE activity) were below levels found in 2007. Nonetheless, the value of merger and acquisition expenditures within the total has basically been on an upward trajectory from 2009 to 2018 (from less than \$300b to \$816b), suggesting that individual MNEs are becoming larger over time. Further, most of that expansion was driven by mergers and acquisitions with investment flowing from developed to developing nations, such that cultural differences may be increasingly relevant to MNE operations.

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Work-life management per se is increasingly acknowledged as an important aspect of HRM (De Cieri & Bardoel, 2015; McCarthy, Darcy, & Grady, 2010; Ryan & Kossek, 2008). Work-life management practices refer to those practices in organizations that are introduced by firms to facilitate employees' ability to meet work and non-work demands (McCarthy et al., 2010). In line with the approach taken by Chung (Chapter 21 in this volume) and Begall and Van der Lippe (Chapter 22 in this volume), work-life policies include flexible working conditions, leave options (e.g., parental, adult care, bereavement, etc.), and child and dependent care (e.g., childcare centers, afterschool care support, etc.) (Smeaton, Ray, & Knight, 2014). Various studies have also linked work-life practices to enhanced employee health and well-being (Grzywacz, Carlson, & Shulkin, 2008), job satisfaction (Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne, 2007; Muse, Harris, Giles, & Field, 2008), improved employee commitment (Allen, 2001; Muse, 2008; Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008) and trust in the organization (Scholarios & Marks, 2004), improved staff morale (McCampbell, 1996), employee performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Lambert, 2000; Muse et al., 2008), and a reduction in employee turnover intentions (Batt & Valcour, 2003; Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne, 2007).

HRM researchers typically interpret and promote work-life management as an important issue to senior management, develop work-life policies and practices, and work with line managers on work-life policy implementation (McCarthy et al., 2010). However, there are inherent and distinct challenges for work-life management in MNEs because there are different understandings of work-life in different societies and the effectiveness of a MNE's work-life policies will be affected by local factors such as national culture and institutional frameworks (Bardoel & De Cieri, 2006; Lewis & Beauregard, 2015). The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has western origins and it is important to recognize how the different meanings and experiences of work-life issues across an MNE lead to a focus on different work-life policies and programs (Lewis & Beauregard 2015). For example, Coca-Cola recognizes that areas being more severely impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic require a different local response than other regions (Coca-Cola, 2019). In Africa, their work-life programs combine prevention, awareness, and treatment, including free condoms, confidential voluntary counseling, and testing for all of their employees and their families. They also make antiretroviral drugs freely available to all employees who need them.

As Morris et al. (2009, p. 987) note in their investigation of the replication of HR practices in global firms, "there is a constant tension between HQ (a.k.a. headquarters) and subsidiaries" in relation to the dilemmas

surrounding responsiveness to local culture and legal demands. This logic suggests that substantive tensions will arise in MNEs attempting to implement global work-life programs. For example, work-life balance remains an unfamiliar concept for HR managers in China (Xiao & Cooke, 2012), and language barriers/nuances can add to difficulties in communicating work-life policy in a global organizational structure (Van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010).

Although tension-centered theory might be used to analyze a broad range of organizational issues, for present purposes, it is here applied to work-life issues in MNEs. Technology change, cultural differences within and between nations, relevant local and national laws, regulations, and political circumstances, and diverse understandings of gender and sexual orientation each impinge on the tensions that emerge around work-life in MNEs. Nonetheless, these issues are addressed only to the extent they are relevant to the emergence or resolution of tensions around work-life in MNEs.

The research question addressed here is whether tension-centered theory can be used to develop a conceptual framework for analyzing and enhancing work-life initiatives in MNEs. The analysis is centered upon relevant bodies of research, with background information from the results of qualitative research on this topic involving managers at 27 MNEs (Bardoel, 2016).

Tensions in Global Work-Life Management

In developed western countries a combination of demographic, labor market, generational changes, and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy and subsequent increasingly competitive landscape for recruiting and retaining talented employees have all been factors driving the growth in work-life initiatives in organizations (Bardoel & Grigg, 2010). More recently, work-life management is also becoming a key concern for employees in many Asian regions because the rapid growth of developing local economies often requires long hours and overtime. A Catalyst study of work-life perspectives in Asia found that employees working in China, India, and Singapore reported high levels of job focus, career ambition, and interest in work-life fit and workplace flexibility (Sabattini & Carter, 2012). Consequently, the concept of work-life effectiveness is coming to the attention of global organizations because, in managing a globally dispersed workforce, they also need to remain sensitive to the role of national, social, and institutional contexts. Evidence of this comes from Chandra's study (2012) of WLB in Anglo-Saxon and Western European countries which showed that WLB practices and family-friendly

policies are distinctly different between western and eastern countries, and managing for these differences presents a challenge for MNEs. For less-developed nations, Heymann (2006) finds that culture, gender relations, and economic circumstances each impinge on work-life balance in different ways across nations.

However, although there are variations of work-life issues based on national and cultural differences, work-life consultants Shapiro and Noble (2001) identified three consistent work-life themes that employees from around the world identify as being important barriers to reconciling their work and personal lives (see also Heymann & Earle, 2009). These included a lack of flexible work policies and practices, the availability and affordability of dependent care, and the negative impact of work overload and long working hours. Hence, there are cross-national commonalities in terms of tensions between work and life for employees that support calls for global work-life initiatives.

Tensions might be understood as existing at the level of the individual addressing conflicts between work and family; related research typically finds that the work role often interferes with the family role in developed nations, particularly for women (Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005; Losoncz & Graham, 2010), and that work-life initiatives can respond to these conflicts (e.g., Powell & Greenhaus, 2006). Several recent studies have explored tensions in organizational life, by identifying tensions at both micro- and macro-levels (Ashcraft, 2000; Dallimore & Mickel, 2006). Although tensions at the individual level are crucial to understanding work-life management, applying that term is here restricted to the organizational and cross-national levels. So, for example, conflicts between work and family facing women in one society are relevant to this research only to the extent those conflicts are similar to or diverge from those in other societies, but are not labeled as tensions *per se*.

Tension-Centered Theory

Stohl and Cheney (2001, pp. 353–354) define organizational tensions, as a “...clash of ideas or principles or actions and the discomfort that may arise as a result of organizational conflict.” Following this definition, Tracy argues these organizational contradictions are “inescapable, normal and, in some cases, to be embraced” (2004, p. 121). Lewis (2000) argues that organizational tensions and paradoxes may be used in two ways to develop insights into organizational phenomena and change. First, tension and paradox may be viewed from a structural perspective and understood as a characteristic of

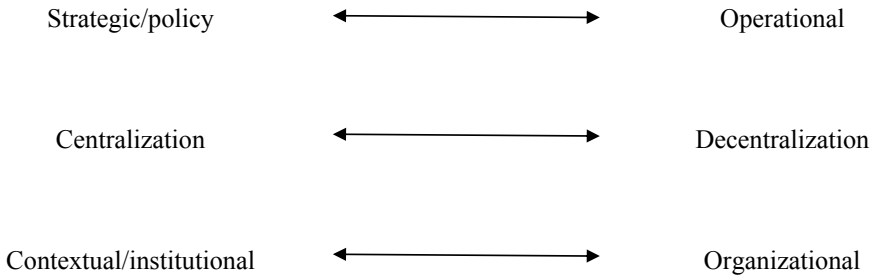


Fig. 23.1 Tensions in global work-life management

organizational structure that shapes organizational life. Second, tension and paradox may be viewed from an individual/agency perspective, as a social process through which individuals make sense of their organizational life. As Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004, p. 82) explain, “a tension-centered approach begins with the premise that organizations are conflicted sites of human activity” where conflicting demands shape corporate decision making and individual experience.

Poole and Van de Ven (1989, p. 564) argue that tension-centered approaches are an important adjunct for theory building because they expand the scope of inquiry and allow us to “...divulge inconsistencies in our logic or assumptions.” At a more practical level, Tracy and Trethewey (2005) contend that tension-centered approaches offer opportunities for organizational change and transformation through, for example, constructing alternative perspectives, or new forms of language and concepts that contribute to change by capturing the tensions inherent in the politicized nature of organizational structures and practices.

Tension-centered theory offers a framework for understanding and responding to conflicts that can otherwise render organizational initiatives ineffective. Is this also true in the case of work-life management in MNEs?

Organizational tensions are placed into the three categories depicted in Fig. 23.1. Drawing on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2008), these particular categories were selected *ex post*, after themes had emerged from the earlier qualitative analysis (Bardoel, 2016), and were selected in light of both the results and consistency with prior research on global HRM and work-life management.¹ They are described and discussed here to help clarify what follows, and while the categories

¹The categories were not developed in a theoretical vacuum, and a lengthier list (with six mainly but not entirely overlapping categories) was developed from prior research to generate the interview instrument.

fit the data presented later, other categories could emerge in future studies. Following discussion of the categories, the issue of tension resolution is addressed; that material is drawn directly from tension-centered theory.

Strategic/Policy Versus Operational

Lobel and Faught (1996) identified a strategic approach to work-life initiatives as involving an integrated set of policies, programs, and cultural change efforts that reinforce business strategies (e.g., lower cost producer or providing superior customer service). Implicitly, they recognized that immediate, operational needs of the organization may need to be sacrificed in favor of a strategic, long term approach toward work-life management and business needs. In practice, front-line managers may experience tension between existing, proven operational methods and strategic work-life initiatives. For example, where inflexible and long work hours are the norm, introducing flexible scheduling may disrupt production and raise costs in the short-run.

It is possible that tensions between strategic and operational concerns have heightened in recent decades for some MNEs. While advances in cheap and fast computing and communication may help facilitate global operations, global sourcing has increased dramatically in the last few decades (Hausman, Lee, & Subramaniam, 2005), simultaneous with substantial reductions in inventories (Chen, Frank, & Wu, 2005, 2007; Rajagopalan & Malhotra, 2001). Taking a just-in-time approach to global production makes a MNE subject to high costs from disruptions, which could be associated with adverse weather or other natural events, man-made catastrophes or political unrest. In turn, while strategic work-life concerns might justify shutting a plant for religious celebrations, this might occur precisely when increased production becomes necessary.

Centralization Versus Decentralization

One of the most well-documented issues for MNEs is the tensions caused by the degrees of centralization and decentralization of decision making that result from managing employees across multiple geographic locations (Brewster, Sparrow, & Harris, 2005; Lucio, 2008). Dowling (2009) observed that 20 years ago most MNEs ran their headquarters' HR as silos with little day to day oversight of workplace level HR. Things are different now. The focus of national/regional HR is often to generate routine employment contracts and policies, whereas headquarters' HR will often transmit a whole

new layer of global HR initiatives to national/regional HR and employees worldwide. The different foci of the different levels of HR in an MNE can potentially lead to tensions in work-life management (Dowling, 2009).

Pivotal to the centralization versus decentralization debate is that, although work-life policies might be designed and developed at the central level by HR managers and directors, they are generally implemented and managed at the unit level by line managers and supervisors (McCarthy et al., 2010; Ryan & Kossek, 2008). Wise (2005) found in a study of line managers and human resource managers in two financial services organizations that there were tensions between implementing formal work-life policies versus informal and discretionary practice. In this case, although HR had taken a strategic approach to developing a policy related to employees taking time off for dependents, there was considerable variability across the two organizations operating under the same corporate policy.

Somewhat differently, the fact that ultimate authority resides in global headquarters may lead to situations where a mixed policy in terms of centralization/decentralization is perceived as pure centralization by local managers. For example, a global diversity manager claimed to have an 80/20 rule, whereby 80% of work-life policies are standard, with 20% being tied to local business needs, culture, and laws, however a local manager believed that cultural considerations were ignored in the process of policy setting (Bardoel, 2016).

Many studies have concluded that line manager support is crucial in terms of employee work-life outcomes (e.g., Crain et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2010; Sánchez-Vidal & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). However, line managers can also be instrumental in undermining formal work-life policies if they believe their performance is strictly tied to costs and productivity (Bardoel, 2016), or by only allowing some subordinates to access policies or in some instances none at all (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Kossek & Friede, 2006). Similarly, managers might put subtle pressure on employees not to use work-life policies for fear of being seen as poor workers (Waters & Bardoel, 2006), particularly if the employees are women (Williams, 1999). More subtly, Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann (2012) find that the motherhood wage penalty varies substantially cross-nationally, depending in large measure upon social attitudes regarding mother's employment. It is plausible to suggest those attitudes are often held by supervisors in a position to provide or deny effective access to work-life policies within a MNE.

Contextual/Institutional Versus Organizational

The organizational context for MNEs is characterized by the constant need to respond to global competition and technological innovations which often generate pressure on employees in terms of the patterns and demands of work. At the same time, the contextual and institutional environment in which employees live has undergone dramatic changes in the recent decades (Hein, 2005). The development of work-life initiatives can be traced to the entry of women and particularly mothers into the workforce and professional careers in developed nations, such as the US (Moen & Roehling, 2005; Williams, 1999); work-life initiatives facilitated the retention of these women. Internationally, with the exception of Africa, it is also true that women's labor force participation grew faster than men's in recent decades (Lim, 2002). However, rates of women's labor force participation vary substantially across individual nations, altering the context for MNE work-life initiatives across nations.

For examples of the complexities involved here, De Cieri and Bardoel (2009) find that MNE efforts to attract and retain women diverge depending on local gender norms and economic conditions. MNE managers claim that Korean women tend to stop working after they marry and have children; women in Singapore and Hong Kong face an abundant supply of cheap immigrant, domestic labor, making childcare less of an issue, while women in China and Vietnam may have access to childcare performed by other (women) family members (p. 190).

Simultaneous with the increase in women's labor force participation were decreases in fertility, particularly in developed nations (Lim, 2002), motivating work-life initiatives to accommodate non-caregivers. More recently, although women continue to provide most childcare, men's participation has expanded in developed nations (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Craig & Mullan, 2011), increasing the value of work-life initiatives that respond to the caregiving commitments of men. Very differently, workforces are aging in many developed nations (Bardoel & De Cieri, 2006), which expands the value of work-life initiatives that help retain older workers while facilitating caregiving commitments to the elderly.

A rapidly developing trend in recent years has been the expansion of corporate rights and benefits, particularly in the US, for gay or lesbian employees, and for transgender employees (reported by 91 and 83% of Fortune 500 companies, respectively; HRC, 2019). Almost simultaneously, the legalization of same-sex marriage has occurred in many developed nations (Procon.org, n.d.). Work-life initiatives among MNEs may be well-suited to respond to these shifts, but may create tension between organizational consistency and

the local context if they operate in nations, such as Nigeria, where same-sex marriage is illegal (*ibid.*). Luiz and Spicer (2019) found MNEs based in developed countries with operations in Africa found it difficult to export LGBT inclusive policies and, while some made the attempt, ultimately local laws and mores tended to be controlling. Broadly, the specific groups covered by diversity and inclusion initiatives varies substantially, as found in a sample of corporate websites in four European nations and the U.S. (Jonsen, Point, Kelan, & Griebble, 2019), making it less than obvious which groups should be targeted in work-life initiatives across an MNE.

Legislation related to work-life has been passed in most countries where MNEs might operate (Heymann, Earle, & Hayes, 2009). Legislation might in some cases effectively replace or supplant MNE work-life policies, as in the case of paid family leave. However, the diversity of coverage in terms of length of maternity leave, payment mechanisms, whether paternity leave is covered, and leave policies for other purposes vary substantially (*ibid.*). This diversity makes the application of generic work-life policies less efficient because, for example, employees in one nation might be largely satisfied with state-funded maternity or paternity leave, and instead place a high value on child care supports. Elsewhere, leave provisions might be more highly valued, enhancing the value of flexible work-life policies that can be applied appropriately under local conditions. More specifically, Ollier-Malaterre (2009) finds in a comparison of corporate work-life policies in the U.S., U.K., and France that there is far lesser coverage in France, in part because of state support for early childhood education, but also because French employers tend to view work-life programs as a social benefit, rather than a competitive advantage.

Legislative differences may in part reflect cultural differences, and those differences could similarly drive a wedge between the effectiveness of any specific work-life policy or practice across nations. For this reason, Von Glinow, Drost, and Teagarden (2002) encouraged future researchers to use broad research lenses with multiple embedded contexts when conducting globally distributed HR research.² Similarly, work-life scholars have called for future research to incorporate a focus on how global organizations can be inclusive of work-life issues in multiple cultural contexts (De Cieri & Bardoel, 2015; Poster & Prasad, 2005).

More broadly, these shifts and differences may imply that what represents an effective work-life policy or practice in one nation may be in tension with a policy or practice that is effective in another. Further, it is not clear that resolving this tension in favor of local context is always ideal, given that

²This research is specifically related to IHRM. For simplicity, the term “global HR” is used instead.

employees often work or are transferred cross-nationally, and that knowledge of inconsistent or conflicting policies could become widespread and generate adverse publicity or low employee morale.

Martin, Gollan, and Grigg (2011) provide an example of how these tensions intersect in the context of employer branding of MNEs. They argue that branding creates an inherent tension between differentiating the organization and making it fit in or be similar to others. That tension can be viewed through the lens of local tailoring of work-life initiatives, which could either serve to differentiate the organization in order to attract and retain rare talent (e.g., through working time flexibility) or by mimicking the practices of other local organizations (e.g., through design of locally-specific diversity programs). That is, even if local input is valuable in terms of addressing the tension between centralization and decentralization, there remains a tension between contextual/institutional factors and organizational factors.

A Framework for Resolving Tensions in Global Work-Life Management

Having identified potential tensions related to global work-life management, the next step is to consider ways to address these tensions. Poole and Van de Ven (1989, pp. 566–567) identify four potential responses to tensions, or what they label “paradoxes,” that can be applied to global work-life management: opposition, spatial separation, temporal separation, and synthesis. The first, opposition, involves recognition and understanding of tensions, while the next three strategies represent conscious attempts to resolve tensions. An alternative is added to this list of four potential responses: no recognition of tension. This option is not strategic, but is instead added to account for the possibility that work-life initiatives designed without recognition of the potential for organizational tensions may well exacerbate those tensions, or that unrecognized tensions may undercut the effectiveness of any work-life initiative. Each approach is discussed in turn.

Opposition

The *opposition* strategy involves understanding and accepting that tension exists. For example, suppose an MNE created a company-wide policy supporting reduced-hours arrangements as a strategic matter, and that policy created tension with operational needs in some facilities. The opposition strategy involves recognizing, studying and understanding this tension.

The key to opposition strategies lies in an explicit recognition of tensions, and not necessarily an explicit resolution. As such, it "...accepts paradox and tries to work out its implications, [and] can serve as a preliminary step to the other three" (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 567).

Spatial Separation

The second strategy, *spatial separation*, involves clarifying the distinct dynamics at different levels of the organization and different roles across these levels. It can also or instead be applied in the geographic sense; for instance, when two horns of a paradox differ by "physical or social locus" (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 566). For example, spatial separation could involve placing the responsibility for implementing work-life initiatives in the hands of the geographic managers at lower levels of the MNE and giving them accountability for measuring their own success (for related examples, see Budhwar, 2000; Currie & Procter, 2001). Differently, flexibility might only be made available to high-level employees or rising stars, which is a form of spatial separation which may respond to tension between strategic and operational concerns, but could cause demoralization among front-line employees.

Spatial separation is particularly relevant to the present analysis. Rozenweig (2006) concluded that HRM is the function in an MNE that is most likely shaped by local responsiveness. Earlier work by Rozenweig and Nohria (1984) found that the forces for local responsiveness were strongest for those HR practices in MNEs which are influenced by well-defined cultural norms and by local labor laws. In MNEs, work-life policies and practices need to be informed by local norms and laws because the relationship between work and non-work activities will be heavily influenced by both cultural norms and labor laws (Bardoel & De Cieri, 2006; Edwards & Kuruvilla, 2005). An organization's ability to respond to work-family issues is also related to institutional forces that vary across nations (see Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998; Wood & De Menezes, 2010), creating tensions that are unique to global work-life initiatives in MNEs.

Note that spatial separation may in practice create tensions. For example, if local work-life initiatives are implemented and gauged using local criteria as a way to attract talent, that talent may be developed in a fashion which creates expectations the enterprise does not meet elsewhere. That tension, in turn, may limit the ability of the enterprise to develop talent around the globe which can be promoted to headquarters level of transferred to manage operations in different cultural contexts.

Temporal separation

The third strategy is *temporal separation*, which involves taking time into account. For example, if a corporation has spent many years developing global work-life policies, and a strong commitment has been developed (e.g., at IBM, Childs, 2005), it will be easier to mandate standardized work-life policies across all geographies of the MNE. If employees are often moving between countries within the MNE, the value of a consistent approach will be enhanced. Very differently, a temporal separation strategy could involve initial experimentation at a limited number of locations, with expansion later, or the development of a time-line for implementing local work-life initiatives, with different locations starting on the time-line over time. Note that IBM explicitly conceptualizes a temporal separation approach, with the intention to expand the reach of policies over time, which contrasts with spatial separation, where expansion of policy coverage is not planned.

A major advantage of these temporal separation policies is that they allow for feedback and learning over time. Bardoel (2016) found an MNE in banking that pushed out flexible work arrangements, encountered resistance in operations in a different nation, and discovered that managers wanted field training in managing flexible work. That training was provided, which allowed the expansion to continue.

An alternative temporal separation policy involves allowing for, and building out from, local initiatives. For example, a regional HR manager for a health insurance company developed work-life policies specifically designed for an aging workforce, which global HR ultimately provided to other MNE locations (Bardoel, 2016).

Temporal separation may, however, create new tensions. For example, if IBM had developed its global policies in the context of operations in Western, developed nations, the policies might contravene local law and culture in Asian or African nations (e.g., regarding LGBTQ rights).

Synthesis

Synthesis refers to developing new terms and concepts to resolve tensions. The switch among HR researchers from the term “work-family” to “work-life” for relevant programs during the 1990s (Harrington, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007) may be seen as involving such a synthesis. That switch made the programs beneficial to a larger segment of the workforce, and arguably allowed corporations to attract and retain valuable employees, regardless of parental or caregiver status.

Another example of synthesis involves efforts to cast work-life initiatives as part-and-parcel of broader diversity initiatives. Like diversity initiatives in general, work-life initiatives recognize and respect the unique circumstances and talents of individual employees, and strive to turn conflicts around difference into sources of synergy and success (Childs, 2005; Dallimore & Mickel, 2006). Somewhat differently, it is possible to conceive of a synthesis approach to strategic versus operational tensions wherein line managers are provided with the flexibility to develop and implement work-life initiatives that are copacetic with workplace operational needs (for examples, see Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002).

An alternative synthesis approach lies in incorporating work-life discussions into annual reviews, thereby combining evaluation along other metrics with work-life. Relatedly, evaluations of supervisors might include explicit measures of support for work-life (e.g., proportion of employees using flexible work arrangements).

Another synthesis approach might involve incorporating unique, local issues into a global work-life programs. For example, making physical and temporal space for religious observances, or addressing a local health problem (e.g., vaccinations during an outbreak). For a specific example, a US MNE proactively sought to hire disabled employees using a business case rationale. A regional HR director in China responded that the business case did not make sense in China, but ultimately implemented the policy as consistent with corporate social responsibility (Bardoel, 2016).

Synthesis is arguably more likely when the management allows ideas to percolate up from far-flung operations, which is arguably more consistent with a decentralized and contextual/institutional approach. That is, to the extent headquarters support local innovation in work-life programs, the more innovations are likely to occur. However, there is no obvious reason to expect those ideas to be coherent at the organizational or strategic levels, which may simultaneously reduce their usefulness in terms of synthesis for global operations, and even create new tensions (e.g., around religious practices in one society).

More broadly, while synthesis may often sound promising, in practice it is as likely as the spatial or temporal separation approaches to create new tensions. For example, the switch from “work-family” to “work-life” programs may have led some non-parent employees to believe that child care supports are unfair since many employees will never use them. More generally, many non-caregivers might often perceive what are pitched as work-life programs as in fact work-family programs, which are not inclusive of the needs of all employees, which could in turn generate perceptions of unfair treatment.

No Recognition

The fifth option is *no recognition* of tension. Logically, this approach is prior to the opposition strategy, since it may take time to identify tensions. However, it might continue indefinitely in some cases. Returning to the example of reduced-hours options creating tension with operational needs, if corporate culture is such that local managers are uncomfortable reporting on the tension to headquarters, as suggested by research on employee voice and silence (e.g., Morrison, 2011), the MNE might leave the tension festering over time. Alternatively, if information flows are poor within a facility, local managers might have difficulty identifying relevant tensions if the only evidence available is indirect, as in poor quality or low productivity.

A key problem for global work-life strategies, which is relevant to the “no recognition” approach, is that they may be difficult to monitor and assess (Masi & Jacobson, 2003). Unlike measures of quantity and quality for manufactured goods, it may be costly to ascertain whether work-life policies and practices are useful and effective, and the results might be ambiguous. Absent accurate measures, a no recognition approach may easily emerge.

The strategies of spatial separation, temporal separation and synthesis are not mutually exclusive, and “can be combined in practice” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 567). For example, the provision of identical paid parental leave to new mothers and fathers might be viewed as equitable in one society while, in another, it would create a backlash against new fathers who use the policy either because usage represents a betrayal of norms around masculinity or because most fathers are assumed to use the leave for purposes other than childcare (e.g., Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012). Distinct policies could be implemented in the two societies (spatial separation), with an eye toward implementing a uniform policy over time if attitudes around fatherhood shift (temporal separation), while simultaneously either strategically blurring or sharpening the distinction between time off policies for purposes of unpaid care or for leisure (synthesis).

Discussion

For managers, it is reasonable to conclude that consideration of the three axes of tensions around global work-life initiatives, and of the five potential responses considered here, will often be of value. Ignoring the potential for tensions may invite the creation of irrelevant, ineffective, low-value programs. The findings also suggest that absent a corporate culture that is open to

discussion of tensions, work-life initiatives may exacerbate existing tensions and global HQ may not even recognize that it is creating problems, or at least not in a timely fashion. A further implication of this possibility is that monitoring of global work-life initiatives may be valuable.

There are at least two potential sources of bias which may relate to both managers and researchers from Western cultures. One source may emerge in cases where Western notions of progress yield an inaccurate projection of future cultural movement in non-Western societies such that temporal separation may seem reasonable when in fact spatial separation is more appropriate. Another potential source of bias lies in the possibility that some readers, perhaps including some managers, will tend to respond most favorably to the synthesis strategy. In Poole and Van de Ven's (1989) article, synthesis is presented last, and arguably includes some of the most innovative and interesting practices, which involve "new concepts or a new perspective" (p. 567). If this bias exists, it might also be attributable to Western notions of progress.

The discussion leads to four questions relevant to future research and practice:

1. Are effective global work-life initiatives those which favor broad principles over strict policies?
2. Do effective global work-life initiatives include mechanisms to draw at least information and often policy ideas from the local level that reflect particular culture, laws, and operations?
3. Do effective global work-life initiatives tend to be open to expanding the terrain encompassed by work-life initiatives?
4. Are effective global work-life initiatives monitored, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for effectiveness?

If these questions are answered in the affirmative, this would support the utilization of a tensions approach to global work-life initiatives. That is, each question asks whether efforts to address potential tensions are necessary for effective global work-life programs.

In terms of limitations, it is possible that I have overstated the value of the tensions approach. Perhaps most obviously, efforts to search for broad principles (RQ1) could result in overly amorphous, ambiguous and perhaps even operationally meaningless initiatives. Relatedly, expansion of the terrain covered by global work-life initiatives (RQ3) could lead to an overly broad program which strives to serve everyone in terms of diversity, family issues, work-life, job stress, and so forth, which is ultimately ineffective because efforts are spread too thinly. Finally, it is debatable whether a tensions

approach is necessary to believe that monitoring of global work-life program effectiveness is valuable (RQ4), as managers may simply believe that any new practice or procedure should be monitored.

Although the results of future research cannot be known in advance, there are sound reasons, provided above, for pursuing these research questions and a tensions approach to global work-life initiatives.

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