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The discursive possibilities for social entrepreneurs within the discourse of ‘work life balance’

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Introduction

In this paper we examine current debates about work-life balance against a background of changing work practices and the advent of mobile technologies. We contrast the discursive construction of work-life balance in online media with the discursive possibilities available to men and women who construct their identities as ‘social entrepreneurs’ and encounter these issues in their daily lives. In doing so, we draw on data from Web 2.0 media as well as a video diary and narrative interview study.

Work-life balance (WLB) has been a ‘hot topic’ in research, organizational practice (Mescher, et al., 2010, p 21) and the wider media over several years. Print media representations depict WLB as an individual process, achievement and responsibility for those in professional or corporate jobs, where the ‘life’ component is predominantly represented by family commitments to children (Reece, et al., 2009).

Within the WLB academic literature, it is often assumed that we live our lives within different social domains (e.g. work, family, community) and that we are expected to play different roles within these domains (e.g. breadwinner, parent, volunteer). Much research in this area has focused on the individual worker and on factors and strategies that affect their (in)ability to manage WLB (Sturges, 2012). Because of the complexity of these role identities, it is argued that we create physical, temporal and psychological boundaries or borders between them (Clark, 2000). Changes in working practices, such as the advent of mobile technologies, affect both where and how we work. It is suggested that the boundaries between work roles and life roles have become increasingly blurred (Harrington and Ladge, 2009) with even a ‘collapse’ of the demarcation of the home/work environment suggested (Wapshott and Mallett, 2012, p 63).

Research design

In our study, we look at social entrepreneurs, men and women at different life stages, who perform ‘a particularly demanding form of entrepreneurial activity’ (Tracey and Phillips, 2007, p 266). The group was selected on the basis of their potential to face particular WLB challenges through financial instability, moral commitment to work goals and lack of a defined workplace.

For the video and interview study, participants (14 social entrepreneurs) were asked to undertake a week's 'video diary', focusing on their different roles in the various domains of their lives and how they switched (or tried to switch) between them. The approach required them to capture in real time what they saw in front of them rather than to narrate these switches retrospectively, though it was explained this would be a useful supplement to switches too difficult to capture as they happened. As a third agent in the study the camcorder offered a set of eyes and ears for the participant to speak to (Bates, 2013) with a couple of participants referring to it as an 'imaginary friend'.

On completion of filming, the participants were debriefed about the experience of taking part in the video study. They were then invited to review their videos and attend a recorded interview. This involved discussing video excerpts and embedding issues raised in a more in-depth understanding of the participants' lives, exploring their own constructions of WLB and technology use.

For the Web 2.0 media study, data was collected systematically using internet tools and alerts in a daily automated search process over 6 months, using the search term 'work life balance'. Texts were automatically identified via daily searches with links returned to a specified email. We reviewed each day's return to select relevant texts. Materials were logged, downloaded and imported into NVivo, a software package selected to support data management and analysis.

The video data was initially analysed using thematic analysis (King, 1998) using the phases identified by Braun & Clark (2006) specifically to inform the conduct of the interviews. This was supplemented by discursive analysis of the video, interview and Web 2.0 media datasets.

Findings and contribution

We present findings from across these datasets. From our discursive analysis of Web 2.0 media, we identify the three dominant themes in the media discourse of WLB: WLB as individual responsibility (for example, to maintain personal well-being); WLB as an individual competency; and how to achieve WLB by adopting the practices (including technological) of 'successful others'. A more marginal theme in this discourse positions WLB as an unattainable luxury.

With regard to the discursive possibilities available to those who construct their identities as 'social entrepreneurs', our initial analysis of the video and interview data highlights how their identity construction processes are embedded in a discourse of inter-connectedness, which is represented by their reconstitution as individuals within networks of clients, colleagues, family and friends (not necessarily discrete groups) to whom they need to be always available. Digital technologies are implicated in achieving inter-connectedness and availability, whilst the precarious nature of their work underpins its need. We see struggles over identity construction that challenge this discourse, through attempts to access a 'balanced' identity through strategies of control, for example, by closing down access to technologies (the digital detox). Identity construction is also however embedded in justifications for lacking or not needing WLB through a normalising discourse of what it means to be a 'social entrepreneur' (prioritising and valorising creative freedom, achieving social good, and blurred work-life boundaries).

In exploring the contrast between discursive construction of WLB in Web 2.0 media with the lived experience of social entrepreneurs, we contribute to critical approaches which have problematised the concept of WLB (Lewis, et al., 2007; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Vair, 2013).

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