Like Summer and good sex?
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The limitations of the work-life balance campaign

With reference to aspects of Herbert Marcuse, this article explores the limitations of the work-life balance campaign. It argues that it is in essence ‘one dimensional’, and that its underlying trajectory is one of the ‘containment’ of work-life balance readjustments to within the pre-established limits of managerial rationality and capitalist organisation. It contrasts this limited campaign with theories of working-time reduction that offer the potential for an expanded realm of autonomy and a more thorough-going liberation of time from work.

The work-life balance (WLB) campaign is situated within the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and was launched by the Prime Minister in March 2000. The campaign is supported by independent think-tanks such as the Work Foundation and by some large employers such as Sainsbury’s. Its twofold aims are to convince employers of the economic benefits of work-life balance, by presenting real-life case studies; and to convince employers of the need for change. It will campaign over the next five years to ‘help employers provide people with more choice and control over their working time’ (DTI 2003). It aims to do this by focusing upon tackling the long-hours culture in some parts of the UK work place; by targeting these sectors which have acute work-life balance problems; and to provide support, guidance and research upon these issues. Its overall aim is to help to ‘readjust’ the balance between work and life.

Research inspired by the WLB campaign provides lots of compelling evidence of how workers across all occupations are suffering both personally and in their family life from working too long hours. A third of fathers miss seeing their children grow up as they regularly work a 10-hour day. One in three fathers across all occupations regularly exceed the 48 hours working week set by the European Working Time Directive. 40 per cent of fathers start work between 6.30am and 8.30am and 45 per cent work between 5.30pm and 8.30pm. More than half work at least one Saturday a month and one in four work one Sunday a month (Duckworth 25/9/02, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002c). Amongst mothers who work in
non-nine-to-five ‘flexible’ jobs, one in four felt the need for more time with their children and a third felt working hours limited the time they had to play with their children or help with homework (Ghazi 25/9/02). Many parents are working shift patterns that lead to the phenomenon of ‘shift parenting’ where at least one parent is at work for most of the day or night. Consequently traditional family practices such as having meals together and family days out are fast becoming a thing of the past in the ‘24/7’ family. 88% of parents in dual-income families and 54% in single parent families frequently work in what are deemed to be traditional family times—before 8.30am and after 5.30pm (Ghazi 25/9/02). Employees are suffering stress as a consequence of ‘marathon shifts’ (Womack 30/8/02). Compelling evidence of the need to ‘readjust’ working practices for many people.

Melissa Benn has suggested that ‘Being against work-life balance would be a bit like being against summer or good sex’ (Benn 26/9/02). I am not against summer and good sex, nor am I against the WLB campaign. I have written this piece because I feel the WLB campaign, worthwhile though the sentiment is, has some fundamental limitations. Critical though this piece is, it is not written in a spirit of cynicism, but through a wish to highlight and overcome these limitations. There is a Japanese proverb which holds that the last animals to develop a concept of water would be fish. Because they cannot step outside of the particular medium that surrounds them, they cannot truly compare alternatives, and thus cannot understand the world they occupy. The WLB campaign suffers from a similar problem. It is characterised by an inherent and limiting managerialism. This is in part because WLB initiatives and policies seemed mostly aimed at managers and executives who work long hours through a combination of interest in their job, career aspirations and general commitment to a profession. Many manual and unskilled workers work long or unsociable hours due to a much more formal and overt economic compulsion. The WLB campaign has not always dealt with such issues adequately. For example, Hutton has argued that for many people work is the route whereby they express themselves. Work is where ‘we hone our skills, meet our friends and future partners, where we act on the world’ (Hutton 14/5/02. See also Williams 26/1/02). The implication seems to be that work can be a creative interaction with the world. For some this may well be the case. Many professional who have a commitment or calling to their profession would no doubt agree. However, for many this is not the case. How many people would continue with their work if they were no longer paid to carry it out? Very few. Hutton fails to make a fundamental distinction. Work as it is currently organised is not the same as our capacity to interact creatively with the world. Such capacities have been largely hi-jacked and deskilled by the world of work. The capitalist organisation of work includes a fundamental de-skilling of work whereby creative conception is separated from the execution of that work. This brings with it an inherent alienation whereby creative capacity is embodied in an alien product. Despite this, management have routinely advocated work as a route to creative self-expression. This is the offering up of the problem as the solution. The WLB campaign is but the latest in a long line of such managerial thinking. It is evidence of an inability to step outside a particular universe, really compare alternatives in an open way. It is evidence of the paucity of thinking about
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WLB to simply present a continuation of orthodoxy as a genuine change. Can Hutton really not envisage arenas other than work where he might meet friend and future partners? Imbalance indeed. If, as Hutton suggests ‘it is home life that is becoming stressful, isolated and unrewarding’ (Hutton 14/5/02) is this not at least in part because the world of work has taken over and disrupted the balance between it and other aspects of life? Hutton’s point smacks of double accounting and cannot therefore stand as evidence.

A more profound challenge to managers and policy makers is to envisage alternative structures which offer the capacity to interact creatively with the world in more open way, genuinely oriented towards the fulfillment of creative potential (Hayden 1999, Schwarz and Schwarz 1998). The question of reforming work from within, through job enrichment, team building and other endeavours does not really impact upon the fundamental capitalist organisation of that work. Despite the rhetoric, management science has historically attempted to hold the ring of hierarchical control whilst purveying the ideology of ‘industrial democracy’ and humanised work relations. Similarly, the orthodoxy at the heart of the WLH campaign ensures its limited ability to view alternative forms of interaction. The managerialist rationality at the heart of the WLH campaign limits its capacity to think about routes or current trend leading to alternative ways of living and different relationships between life and work. The organisation of work is what has historically caused the imbalance and colonised peoples lives. It may be a positive contribution to the quality of individual peoples lives if they do have a better balance between work and life. However for the WLH campaign to claim, or at least imply, that reform of the world of work is the only solution to a better work-life balance is the very essence of bad faith. This bad faith stems fundamentally from the managerialism at the heart of WLH rhetoric, that the organisation that causes people to work long hours, neglect their families and themselves will be the thing that saves them from the attendant problematic experiences. The capitalist nature of the organisation of work, and the consequent compulsion that most workers experience suggests the need to a work-time reduction rather than a re-balance within the organisational setting (Beck 2000, Gorz 1982, 1985, 1999, Hayden 1999). However the managerialist universe of discourse within pre-established boundaries of the WLH campaign lead it to hold up the problems caused by this capitalist orthodoxy as the solution (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002a, 2002b). WLH rhetoric, propelled by employers organisations suggest that job redesign programmes, job enrichments and caring policies are a ‘win-win’ solution to the ills of modern work life.

Given this underlying rationale the WLH campaign is self-limiting. It only goes as far as seeking to redesign work within the established parameters of the work place, as it already exists. This self-limiting rationality culminates in a view whose focus is very much about what is good for the firm. The suggestion that the WLH campaign is a ‘win-win’ situation whereby the interests of individual workers and the firm can so easily coincide provides clear evidence of the underlying managerialism within WLH initiatives.

For example, the ‘Statement of Principles’ from the Employers for Worklife Balance advocates state that:

UK employers operate in an increasingly competitive environment
in which flexibility is key to meeting customers’ demands. At the same time, employees need to be able to balance work with their other interests. Employees are more productive if they are able to balance their work and personal lives effectively, thereby facilitating enhanced delivery of organisational objectives (Employers for Worklife Balance 2002).

The implication is clear; the WLB campaign starts and finishes, logically and here even linguistically, with the needs of employers and organisational objectives. The Statement of Principles goes on to suggest that an organisation committed to WLB

1. Recognises that effective practices to promote work-life balance will benefit the organisation and its employees.
2. Acknowledges that individuals at all stages of their working lives work best when they are able to achieve an appropriate balance between work and other aspects of their lives.
3. Highlights the employers’ and the employees’ joint responsibility to discuss workable solutions and encourages a partnership between individuals and their line managers.
4. Develops appropriate policies and practices that meet the specific needs of the organisation and its employees.
5. Communicates its commitment to work-life strategies to its employees.
6. Demonstrates leadership from the top of the organisation and encourages managers to lead by example. (Employers for Worklife Balance 2002)

This easy assumption of a coincidence of interests, and the inability to view issues outside of the pre-established manageralist universe of the organisation suggests that the WLB campaign is limited by a ‘one dimensionality’ (Marcuse 1964). Certain aspects of the WLB campaign exhibit what Marcuse called ‘internally self-validating analytical propositions’, whereby the discourse refers to an internally self-justifying armoury of concepts to justify its basic pre-established trajectory. In this it fails to develop a wider view of the world and consider a wider range of alternative approaches. This process then becomes routine and amounts to a ‘closing of the universe of discourse’ and a ‘containment’ of alternatives. It is these features that amount to what Marcuse has called ‘one dimensional thought’. It should be noted that Marcuse does not claim that such trends towards one dimensionality are in any way complete. What he did identify were certain trends that moved towards a ‘containment’ of real alternatives, whilst others moved towards the breaking of that containment. This is a point that is often overlooked by those who refer to Marcuse’s work.

The WLB campaign exhibits clear evidence of this one dimensionality. The tone and rhetoric of the WLB campaign consistently suggests that the working practices and relations already existing within the orthodox workplace are the only place where such a re-balancing can occur. Hidden within this rhetoric is consistently conflation of the economic and business interests of the firm with the well-being of the individual worker. There may be workplace situations for professional workers where this is genuinely the case. However the tone of the WLB campaign as a whole is one that suggests that this is always the case. It is not. Moreover, the manageralist of the WLB campaign as it currently stands deals with productivity and financial performance, absenteeism, the retention of key trained staff, and the
quality of the firms’ product or service as their central concerns. Only if one assumes some form of industrial democracy, which is highly dubious assumption, can this focus also culminate in a ‘win’ for the individual and their life. If we take the 6 points above made by the Employers for Worklife Balance as representative of this underlying rationale, a more critical approach might reveal the following:

1. There is a conflation of interests between the organisation and the individual worker that hides the reality of divergent interests. ‘Effective practices’ that will mutually benefit the organisation and the employee are not so easily arrived at, and the management of the organisation will likely be the final arbiter of what counts as ‘effective’ in this regard as much as any other, as it impinges upon operations.

2. The reference to ‘individuals at all stages of their lives’ and the humanistic tones in which they are put are directly linked to ‘work best’, which highlights the concern to improve operational efficiency rather than enable the real development of the human being concerned. The rhetoric of seeking an ‘appropriate balance’ between work and ‘other aspects’ tends to connote that the particular work they are engaged in is a fundamental aspect of peoples lives by choice. It denies the economic compulsion to work within most peoples’ lives.

3. The rhetoric of ‘joint responsibility’ in the search for ‘workable solutions’ and ‘partnerships’ encourages the view that all possibilities are open. The term ‘workable solutions’ is presented as an open field of possibilities in which all have a ‘responsibility’ to engage. This sentiment then jars with the reference to ‘line manager’ with which this point ends. Joint participation is conflated with line management in an easy formula that hides, logically and linguistically, the inevitable divergence of interests.

4. The rationale of developing ‘appropriate policies and practical responses’ tends to suggest that some back-ground notions of appropriateness and fit with basic trajectory have already been developed. There is an element of tautology in this, that the ‘needs of the organisation and its employees’ is the pre-established boundaries of thought within which such appropriateness will be determined. This point also clearly evidences the conflation of divergent interests into a seamless and spurious unity. The very language of ‘the organisation and its employees’, that is the employees that already belong to the prior unity of the organisation, demonstrates this.

5. The rhetoric of organisations ‘communicating its commitment to work-life strategies’ as evidence of an adherence to such strategies is a clear demonstration of the ‘internally self-validating analytical propositions’ to which Marcuse refers. Such communication demonstrates only a commitment to the rhetoric that is being communicated, and cannot logically stand as evidence of anything else other than internal self-validation.

6. The very notion that work-life strategies should end with a call for a demonstrable ‘leadership from the top of the organisation’ is clearly in contradiction with the basis of the above points 2 and 3 in particular.

These features underlying the WLB campaign and its rhetoric of ‘family-friendly policies’ and greater flexibility within the organisation shows its limitations. The WLB campaign does not offer alternative ways for a re-balancing
of work and life outside the established economic and political universe of existing working patterns and relations. The rationality of WLB as described here can be situated within a much longer history of managerial attempts to develop strategies for integrating individuals into the workplace more effectively. An earlier and well-known advocate of such strategies was Elton Mayo, who is credited with inventing the early rudiments of Human Relations Management. It is instructive to remind ourselves that what Mayo was interested in devising was ways to 'engineer spontaneous co-operation'. The contradiction at the heart of such propositions is clear. There can be no better example of one-dimensional thought and its attendant 'containment'. Similarly, in the context of the current WLB campaign, Benn (26/9/02) suggest that the 'win/win language of polibiz' and its celebration of WLB thinking is 'depoliticising'. She writes,

The official take on working time, exemplified by WLB and the government, is that it can and should be depoliticised: it denies that there should ever, God forbid, be a conflict of interests between employers and their employees or that employees should have creative ideas of their own about how work should be run. Instead, official arguments for WLB, flexicuts and the rest are couched in terms of the economic benefits to business. Profit margins up! Absenteeism down! But trade union involvement in the meaning and future of work, and pay, is becoming more not less vital... (Benn 29/9/02).

It is beyond the scope of this piece to provide a prolonged account of the responses of the Trades Union movement to the WLB campaign and whether the formalism of the Trades Union Movement is the best place for the development of alternative forms of work. However, what Benn is clearly interested in the exploration of real alternatives to work as understood within the business world, rather than alternatives within the pre-established boundaries of a managerial take on work. It is clear that there are many current examples of alternative futures to work.

To discuss fully the nature of these alternatives, one would need to start with a more fundamental critique of the nature of work, why it is often experienced as something negative and why people still go to work. In short, as something largely deskilled, characterised by a fundamental separation of conception from execution and something people do for money. As such, any discussion about re-balancing work and life would need to connect with how work, or more properly our creative capacities can be used for more meaningful and self-determined activities in ways that help us to meet our material needs outside the orthodox, managed and deskilled work-place.

These are well known features of a critique of work. What is often less well known and discussed are the myriad experiments that are currently trying to articulate such alternative ways of living and working.

It is beyond the scope of this short piece to discuss the myriad micro-experiments in any detail and I have discussed the contours of some them at more length elsewhere (Shorthose 2000). However, clear examples of these micro-experiments can be found in LETS schemes, D-I-Y economies, community development programmes and self-build housing groups. (Croall 1997, Dauncey 1992, Schwarz and Schwarz 1998, Shorthose 2000). There are a host of interesting and vital
examples of alternative routes to a balance between life and work in the developing world. These exhibit alternative forms of labour, creativity and convivial consort with others, as an expression of values outside a capitalist orbit (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997). An examination of these alternatives demonstrates the limitations of the thinking at the heart to the WLB campaign. Perhaps more significantly however, they also articulate potential futures for the organisation of work, offer alternative structures through which individuals to can begin to meet their material needs and perhaps a place where alternative resources such as free time (Gorz 1982, 1985, 1999) could be usefully ‘invested’. Such ‘micro-experiments’ offer the potential for people who are enmeshed in de-skilled work to begin to act upon alternative decisions and demonstrate their ‘capacities’ (Sen 1999) and enlarge their ‘capacity for success action’ (Seve 1978). Gorz’s (1982, 1985) arguments for the ‘liberation of time’ and the ‘abolition of work’ are strengthened by their existence, and a ‘politics of time’ that goes beyond the self-limitations of the WLB campaign is made more feasible. It is through such a ‘politics of time’ that Gorz envisages an ‘expansion of the realm of autonomy’, which offers the potential for a far more fundamental readjustment of the relationship between life and work than that allowed for given the self-limitations within the WLB campaign.

There is also growing evidence of a ‘new economy’ of people who choose as an alternative to ‘getting a job’ an independent and self-determined work pattern (Florida 2002, Leadbetter and Oakley 1999, Leadbetter 2000). This entails working in and through highly informal, temporary and fluid networks rather then the formalism of managed work organisations. The temporary and intermittent nature of this work is worth the independence for these often highly qualified and creative people. Any WLB campaign worth its salt would connect with these ‘new economy’ practices and micro-experiments in alternatives. If there is one common and defining feature of these alternative ways of life, it is that they seek a re-balance of the economic with the social, the material with the spiritual, and take questions of the quality and grammar of life to be far more important than the standard of living. A defining feature of these alternatives is that the very distinction between ‘work’ and ‘social life’ is becoming increasingly meaningless. This re-balance grows organically out of the nature of the work itself within such self-determined practices, the way people are choosing to live and the convivial way they interact. This ‘organic’ trend is in very clear distinction to the ‘engineering’ approach to balancing work and life coming out of the WLB campaign as it stands. The ‘organic’ alternatives found in micro-experiments and the ‘new economy’ provides a far more thorough and powerful model of ways in which work and life can be re-balanced. They suggest a labour-life balance to enable individuals to explore their needs and capacities for themselves in a much more self-determined way. If the WLB campaign were to overcome its self-imposed limitations and open itself up to alternatives to the capitalist orthodoxy of work and management, its credentials for talking about life in the context of work would be enhanced, and it would be easier to accept that the WLB campaign really is like summer and good sex.
References


Dti Worklife Balance Campaign Homepage. www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance/


