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Work–life balance: One size fits all? An exploratory analysis of the differential effects of career stage

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Career stage;
Life-cycle approach

Summary This paper explores the antecedents of work–life balance for employees as they progress through different career stages denoted by age. To date, research has failed to adequately explore how work–life balance issues develop over the course of an employee's working life. As a consequence, much of the work–life balance policy and practice research examines WLB issues from a relatively static and unchanging perspective resulting in praxis which is undifferentiated. Such a 'one size fits all' approach to the design and development of work–life balance initiatives is not only costly but likely to be ineffective in terms of meeting the real needs of different categories of employees. This paper challenges the static approaches and instead seeks to examine if and how WLB is affected and shaped by different antecedents as they impact on differing career stages as defined by distinct age categorisations.

The research was carried out among a sample of 729 employees in 15 organisations (10 private sector and 5 public sector organisations) in the Republic of Ireland. Four career stages are considered with regard to both men and women irrespective of their parenting status. The findings suggest that factors which impact upon work–life balance differ marginally across various career stages thereby indicating that WLB is a concern for employees at all career stages and not the preserve of parents with young children only. These findings shed new light on our understanding of the antecedents of work–life balance and have particular implications for organisations who wish to foster a culture which values work–life balance across all career stages for all their employees.

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Introduction

Changes impacting on the work environment over the past 10–20 years such as globalisation of competition, changes in the patterns and demands of work, and the fast pace of technological innovations have placed extra demands upon

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employees (Coughlan, 2000; Department for Education, 2000; Fisher, 2000). Coupled with these organisational and work design changes are demographic changes including the increase in the number of women in the workplace, dual career families, single parent families and an aging population (Brough & Kelling, 2002; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone & Yardley, 1996; Hobson, Delunas, & Kesie, 2001; Smith & Gardner, 2007). Together, these have combined to generate an increasingly diverse workforce whose personal and work related needs are often complex. Organisations that aspire to promote a healthy work–life balance environment within their organisations are now faced with an equally complex problem. How do you assist such a diverse group of employees achieve a healthy balance in a fair and transparent way whilst maintaining organisational efficiency?

Work–life balance is the general term used to describe organizational initiatives aimed at enhancing employee experience of work and non-work domains. Cascio (2000, p. 166) defines work–life balance programs as “any employer sponsored benefits or working conditions that help employees balance work and non-work demands”. Work–life balance arrangements and practices refer to initiatives voluntarily introduced by firms which facilitate the reconciliation of employees’ work and personal lives. Such initiatives include: temporal arrangements that allow employees to reduce the number of hours they work (e.g. job sharing where two employees share one job, part-time working where an employee works less than a full-time equivalent); flexible working arrangements such as flexi-time where employees choose a start and finish time which matches their personal needs but work certain core hours, tele-working/home-working/e-working where employees have locational flexibility in completing their work; work–life balance supports such as employee counselling, employee assistance programs, time management training, stress management training; and childcare facilities on-site or financial support for childcare off-site (e.g. through subsidised childcare). Essentially, work–life balance initiatives are offered by organizations to assist staff to manage the demands of work and personal life (Grady, McCarthy, Darcy, & Kirrane, 2008; McCarthy, 2004).

The business case for the introduction and continued support of these arrangements and practices is that work–life balance has been shown to be a factor which has the potential to affect important workplace issues such as employee turnover, stress, organisational commitment, absenteeism, job satisfaction, and productivity (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2006; Frone et al., 1992; Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk, & Beutell, 1996; Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Veiga, Baldrige, & Eddleston, 2004). In a European study conducted by The Boston Consulting Group and the European Association for People Management (2007) of Human Resource Directors across Europe, work–life balance was ranked as one of the top three challenges facing HR.

To date, much of the research in the work–life balance arena has investigated individual level work–life balance factors such as employee demands for flexible working practices (Brannen & Lewis, 2000; Coughlan, 2000; Den Dulk, 2001), employee satisfaction with work–life or work–family policies and programs (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002;

Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996) and the impact of work–life balance programs on a number of employee level outcomes such as stress, commitment and productivity (Bedeian, Burke, & Moffet, 1988; Darcy & McCarthy, 2007; Frone et al., 1992; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Lambert, 2000; McCarthy & Cleveland, 2005). Other research has explored how work–life balance affects performance at the organizational level (Bloom, Kretschmer, & Van Reenen, 2006).

However there is a lack of consensus about whether the positive effect of work–life benefits is universal (i.e. experienced by all employees, irrespective of their individual characteristics or circumstances) or whether the effect of work–life benefits differ for particular sub-populations of employees (Smith & Gardner, 2007). Some research exists to suggest that employee demographic differences impact upon the outcomes of work–life benefits. For example, McKeen and Burke (1994) explored the extent to which managerial women valued different types of work–life benefits and found significant differences according to age and parental status. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) found that in a homogeneous sample of managers and professionals, the work–life benefits of family-care and flexibility were used by employees possessing different demographic and family status characteristics. Despite the potential advantages to be gained from the implementation of work–life balance initiatives, some initiatives may be costly to implement and it is therefore imperative that organisations firstly consider the likely potential benefits before deciding to provide such initiatives (Darcy & McCarthy, 2007).

This paper explores work–life balance for employees as they progress through different career stages denoted by age. To date, the majority of focus both in the literature and in practice has been on working parents to the exclusion of other employee stakeholder groups. It is the intention of this paper to broaden the discussion beyond working parents to a consideration of different employee career stages to examine the impact of WLB on these very different employee groupings.

Life cycle approach – the impact of age on work–life balance

Researchers have long since recognised that depending on one’s life-stage, different factors take on differing degrees of importance and that these varying factors and issues may affect both attitudes towards work and behaviours in the workplace (Giele & Elder, 1998). Research on adult development has found that as individuals age, they pass through different development stages that affect their employment priorities (Veiga, 1983).

‘Age’ is a marker of a number of life circumstances: career stage, family stage, maturity, biological aging (Moen & Yu, 2000). Finegold, Mohrman, and Spreitzer (2002) offer a theoretical rationale for the significance of age effects within the employment relationship. This rationale draws upon the work of Sparrow (1996) who found that individuals have very different employment preferences as they age and that these preferences when acknowledged and considered by the employer have a significant impact upon job satisfaction and motivation. Guest (1998) found that firms which better meet individuals’ work preferences are more likely to retain

employees and gain their commitment. Therefore, as Finegold et al. (2002) argue, age is just one factor that may shape differences in what people want from work and how attached they are to their organisation.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) proposed by Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) offers some insight into the changing patterns of individual careers. The model suggests that individuals rotate varied aspects of their lives in order to arrange their relationships and roles in new ways. Individuals evaluate the choices and options available through the lens of the kaleidoscope to determine the best fit among work demands, constraints, and opportunities as well as relationships and personal values and interests (Sullivan, Forret, Carraher, & Mainiero, 2009). Interestingly Sullivan et al. (2009) when advancing their career model did so on the basis of age while looking at both men and women.

The hypotheses presented in this paper specifically aim to capture and group key work–life influences as they relate to individual employees within each of the four identified career stages denoted by age. The research is cross-sectional in this regard rather than longitudinal. The research hypothesises that as an individual moves through various career stage categories the challenges he/she faces in relation to their work and non-work domains change. The researchers were not specifically concerned with the working lives of parents per se and so present an adapted model of Roehling, Roehling and Moen's (2001) life-stage model. This model was originally concerned with six distinct life-stages reflecting working parents with and without children notably; *young non-parents* – up to 29 years of age with no children living at home; *preschool aged children* – young working parents up to age 29 whose youngest child is five or younger; *mid-age non-parents* – respondents aged 30 through 39 with no children living at home; *mid-age 30–39 year old workers with school aged children* – parents whose youngest child is aged between 6 and 17; *older non-parents* – respondents aged 40 through 49 with no children living at home; *shifting gears* – respondents with no children living at home aged 50+ who are preparing for retirement.

The current research seeks to operationalize 'life-stage' based on age as reflecting distinct career stages and in this way expand the research by moving the discussion beyond dependent children and working parents in order to encapsulate a broader definition of work–life balance as it applies to all employees. To this end four age groupings are presented and examined which are posited as representing distinct career stages. These stages would be as follows; age 18–29, *early career stage*; age 30–39, *developing career stage*; age 40–49, *consolidating career stage* while finally age 50+, represents *pre-retirement career stage*.

If it is the case that employees experience work–life balance in different ways depending on their career stage, then the implications for organisations and government policy are significant. For example, to persist in offering 'a one size fits all approach' to work–life balance where a range of WLB practices are offered across the organisation irrespective of particular needs and requirements of different categories of employees is likely to result in less than effective policies and practices for the organisation and a mismatch between employee needs and organisational WLB responses (Grady et al., 2008).

The 2007 Work–Life Balance in Ireland Study (McCarthy, Grady, Darcy, & Kirrane, 2007) identified the most common work–life balance arrangements in place in both the public and private sector in Ireland. This study highlighted the fact that the majority of organizations offer a limited set of arrangements to their employees. While this set of arrangements was open to all employees it tended to be more focused on those with caring responsibilities such as childcare or eldercare issues. They reported that there was little evidence of Irish organizations offering broad WLB programmes or initiatives which could not be construed as targeting this one narrow sub-set of employees.

The findings from this paper will offer us an opportunity to analyse work–life balance for individuals at differing stages in their career as defined by their age. In doing so we hope to advance the literature on work–life balance while at the same time providing some insights for practitioners as they try to grapple with the very different needs of an increasingly work–life balance conscious workforce across the various categories under examination.

Hypotheses

In order to explore the differential effects of WLB based on career stage/age, a number of independent variables were derived from an examination based on a review of the relevant literature. They are job involvement, perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence. A discussion of each variable and the rationale for it is inclusion is set out below, immediately followed by the derived hypotheses linked to each.

Job involvement

Job involvement can be defined as "psychological identification with one's work" as well as "the degree to which the job situation is central to the employee and his or her identity" (Lawler & Hall, 1970, pp. 310–311). Research tends to point to high levels of work–life conflict amongst those individuals who are very involved in their work (Kossek & Ozeki, 1988). Several researchers have found a positive relationship between job involvement and work–life imbalance, specifically work–life conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins, Duxbury, & Irving, 1992). High work involvement and high family involvement have been shown to be positively related to the number of hours spent in work and family activities respectively (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These hours in turn have been linked to increased work and family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) resulting from role overload (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991).

Secondly, Pleck (1979) suggested that psychological involvement in a role acts primarily as a sensitizer to interference effects, making the individual more aware of problems within that role. This awareness, in turn, increases perceived role conflict (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). Kossek and Ozeki (1988) concluded from their review of relevant research that workers who have higher job involvement tended to experience somewhat more work–family conflict. This finding runs counter to the popular myth that workers who have high involvement in their jobs are likely to have less concern for their family issues (Kossek & Ozeki, 1988). The

link between career stage and job involvement has been extensively examined with the relationship generally pointing to a positive one (Lynn, Cao, & Horn, 1996; Ornstein, Cron, & Slocum, 1989; Slocum & Cron, 1985).

Therefore, it is hypothesised that high levels of job involvement will increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing work–life imbalance. This is likely to be especially true of individuals at the early and mid-career stage of their careers irrespective of their gender. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Work–life balance will be negatively related to high job involvement.

Perceived managerial support

The willingness of managers to adjust job tasks, work schedules, and provide assistance (through two way communication, training, and recognition programmes) can help employees to manage their work and non-work demands better (Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Wilson, 1997). Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) suggest that day-to-day managerial support may be the most critical cultural dimension on employee decision making about the use of initiatives. While there has been a notable increase in the number of organisations offering formal work–life or family-friendly policies, this has not been met with a reciprocal increase in the uptake of these policies (McCarthy, Darcy, & Grady, 2010). The company culture and more specifically the views of managers and colleagues appear to present a barrier to the utilisation of such policies (Allen, 2001; Lambert, 2000; Lewis & Taylor, 1996; Thompson et al., 1999). Strongly held informal cultural values can have the effect of negating any formal family–friendly policies which may be in place within an organisation (Poelmans & Sahibzada, 2004).

The importance of managerial consideration of WLB is emphasised by Murphy and Zagorski (2005). They suggest that senior management need to set the organisational tone around WLB by introduction and clear endorsement of WLB policies in the workplace. They go further by suggesting that management should actually act as gatekeepers of WLB through the active encouragement of employees to engage with WLB initiatives. Finally, they add that management should become active role models for the operationalization of WLB policies through their own participation. This latter view is well supported in the literature (McDonald, Brown, & Bradley, 2005). Thompson et al. (1999) went further in their assertion that day-to-day management support may in fact be the most ‘critical cultural dimension’ with regard to employee participation in WLB initiatives.

Indeed, a supportive workplace has been identified as being critical to the successful implementation and uptake of family-friendly policies (Galinsky et al., 1996; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Thompson et al., 1999) and the role of direct managers has been established as a particularly significant factor in this regard (Galinsky et al., 1996; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Frankel (1998) argues that an antagonistic workplace culture in terms of family–friendly policies can see even the most innovative and sophisticated work–family policies falter.

The role of managerial support and attitude is therefore an important variable in determining employee uptake of

family–friendly policies and hence can be seen to have a direct impact on work–family conflict (McCarthy & Cleveland, 2005). It is clear that managers have a role to play in terms of translating any family–friendly work policy into practice. The level of perceived support an individual employee receives from their direct line manager may vary considerably as a direct result of their manager’s personal beliefs and attitude towards such programmes. It is highly unlikely, for example, that a manager who believes that hard work and long hours are a necessary and vital demonstration of an individual’s commitment to the organisation is likely to reward someone who decides to avail themselves, however short-term, of family–friendly work policies.

Thompson et al. (1999) found that without a supportive organisational family–friendly culture employees might be reluctant to take advantage of work–family benefits. Similarly, Brannen and Lewis (2000) reported many employees in their UK study were reluctant to use work–family benefits, especially when these benefits were dependent on their manager’s discretion and might be considered favours rather than entitlements. Thus, we hypothesise that high levels of perceived managerial support will increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing work–life balance, particularly in the early stages of career. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H2. Work–life balance will be positively related to high levels of perceived managerial support.

Perceived career consequence

When an employee participates in work–life programmes which have the indirect effect of making the employee less visible within the organisation, that employee runs a significant risk of suffering career consequences as a result (Bailyn, 1993). Many organisations still labour under a culture of presenteeism, whereby an employee’s commitment and loyalty to the organisation is measured in terms of the amount of employee face-time at work. In this way participating in a work–life balance programme potentially reduces the time an employee spends in the office and so undermines his/her ability to show total commitment to the organisation and hence results in jeopardizing, if not diminishing, the employee’s future career prospects (Glass & Fujimoto, 1995; Perlow, 1995).

There has been considerable empirical research to support the idea that there may be negative career consequences for individuals who opt to utilise work–life balance initiatives or programmes (Finkel, Olswang, & She, 1994; Perlow, 1995; McDonald et al., 2005). Although work–life balance programmes create new ways of working, organisational cultures still reward old ways of working with the result that employees who use work–life programmes are negatively affected (Thompson et al., 1999; Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003).

There is evidence that often a culture prevails that rewards employees for being visibly present at work. Perlow (1995) notes that such a view of WLB practices are effectively a barrier to their use. McDonald et al. (2005) for example suggest that organisational time expectations, such as the number of hours employees are expected to

work, negatively impact on WLB uptake. Indeed others such as Allan, Loudoun, and Peetz (2007) and Pocock, Williams, and Skinner (2007) contend that long working hours are in fact detrimental to the successful achievement of WLB. This assertion is supported by Dex and Bond (2005) who found that long working hours (48 h per week) had the largest effect on work–life imbalance. Pocock et al. (2007) also reported that long working hours were consistently associated with poor work–life outcomes. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Availing of work–life balance initiatives will be perceived to be positively related to negative career consequences.

Methodology

The research was carried out among a sample of 729 employees in 15 organisations; 10 private sector and 5 public sector organisations, in the Republic of Ireland. A three strand approach was used to gather the data at multiple levels in each organisation;

- A sample of employees from each organisation was chosen by the organisation concerned to participate in the study and a questionnaire (electronic or paper-based) was distributed. In total 729 employees participated in the study.
- Telephone or face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of middle/line managers in each participating organisation. In all 133 middle/line managers participated in the study.
- A face-to-face interview was conducted with the HR director/manager. All 15 HR directors/managers participated in the study.

In all 342 men and 378 women participated in the research with the average age of participants being 37.4 (9 respondents failed to indicate their gender). Nearly half of all participants reported having at least one child (46%) while 14% of participants reported assuming some form of eldercare responsibility.

Participants were re-categorised into four distinct age groupings namely 18–29 years of age (early career stage), 30–39 years of age (developing career stage), 40–49 (consolidating career stage) and finally 50+ years age (pre-

retirement career stage). Table 1 details a breakdown of each age grouping by gender.

Measures

Scales were adapted from previous research for the study and Table 2 highlights the alpha reliability coefficients and variances for each of the included scales. All scale items were completed on a 1–7 likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Job involvement

We used a 6 item scale to measure job involvement adapted from Frone and Rice (1987). Sample item: *'Most of my personal life goals are job-centred'*.

Perceived managerial support

We used a 5 item scale to measure perceived managerial support adapted from Thompson et al. (1999). Sample item: *'In general, managers in this organisation are quite accommodating of personal needs'*.

Perceived career consequence

We used a 3 item scale to measure perceived career consequence adapted from Thompson et al. (1999). Sample item: *'To turn down a promotion or transfer for family related reasons will seriously hurt one's career progress in this organisation'*.

Work–life balance

The dependent variable of work–life balance was adapted from Clark (2001) with all items reverse coded to reflect a work–life balance measure rather than the original work–life imbalance measure. Ratings were completed on a 1–7 likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) however were reverse code entered. Sample item: *'My job keeps me away from the people and activities that are important to me too much'*.

Control variables

Job tenure was included as a control variable and was measured in terms of years of service. Job tenure relates to the length of time an individual employee has been in their current role. A separate question probed organisational tenure i.e. the length of time an individual employee had been working for the organisation. We found that the majority of employees, over 96%, had only held one role in their orga-

Table 1 Career stage as defined by age, by gender breakdown.

	Men		Women		Total <i>n</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Early career stage/18–29 years	89	25.9	85	22.5	174
Developing career stage/30–39 years	122	35.6	136	36.0	258
Consolidating career stage/40–49 years	78	22.7	99	26.2	177
Pre-retirement career stage/50+ years	53	15.5	58	15.3	111
Total	342	99.7*	378	100	720

* One male respondent failed to indicate his age – nine respondents did not indicate their gender.

nisation, that of their current position. In light of this organisational tenure was not included in the study.

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the work–life balance scores for men and women. Separately *t*-test analysis was performed for parents and non-parents within the sample. There was no significant difference in scores for men ($M = 27.10$, $SD = 7.77$), and women ($M = 27.43$, $SD = 7.91$; $t(719) = -.451$, $p = .65$). Interestingly there was also no significant difference in scores for parents ($M = 27.52$, $SD = 8.20$) and non-parents ($M = 27.14$, $SD = 7.56$; $t(706) = -.651$, $p = .51$). For this reason gender and parental status were not included as control variables within the study.

Method

The means, standard deviation and intercorrelations of each of the independent and dependent variable(s) included in the study are presented in Table 2. The table shows the intercorrelations for each of the career stages as defined by age.

The three hypotheses posited were tested with four hierarchical regression models using job involvement, perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence as predictors of the dependent variable, work–life balance. Job tenure was entered in the first step as a control variable. Job involvement, perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence were entered in the second step. The process was repeated for each of the four career groupings as defined by age categories, namely early career stage, developing career stage, consolidating career stage and pre-retirement career stage. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 3.

Results

Early career stage/18–29 years

Job involvement, perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence were all found to be significantly correlated with work–life balance for employees in the 18–29 age grouping. The results of the regression analysis found support for the correlation analysis. Job involvement was negatively related to work–life balance ($\beta = -.180$, $p \leq .05$). Perceived managerial support was positively related to work–life balance ($\beta = .238$, $p \leq .05$) while perceived career consequence was strongly negatively associated with work–life balance ($\beta = -.262$, $p \leq .001$).

Developing career stage/30–39 years

Perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence were found to be significantly correlated with work–life balance for employees in the developing career stage. Job involvement was interestingly found to have no correlation with WLB for this group. When we examined the findings of the regression analysis however perceived career consequence was found to be highly negatively associated with WLB for employees in the developing career stage ($\beta = -.339$, $p \leq .001$) and highly positively related with perceived managerial support ($\beta = .208$, $p \leq .001$). Job

involvement did demonstrate a significant negative association but not as powerful as perceived career consequence or perceived managerial support ($\beta = -.166$, $p \leq .05$).

Consolidating career stage/40–49 years

Job involvement, perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence were all found to be significantly correlated with work–life balance for employees in the consolidating career stage grouping. Interestingly however it is job involvement ($\beta = -.278$, $p \leq .001$) which was found to demonstrate the strongest association in terms of the regression analysis. While perceived consequence had some predictive qualities ($\beta = -.136$, $p \leq .10$) it was much less than the strong response of job involvement. Perceived career consequence demonstrated a significant positive relationship with WLB for this consolidating career stage grouping ($\beta = .196$, $p \leq .05$).

Pre-retirement career stage/50+ years

Perceived managerial support and perceived career consequence were found to be significantly correlated with work–life balance amongst our sample of 50+ employees. Yet when our regression analysis was complete it showed strong positive association for perceived managerial support ($\beta = .387$, $p \leq .001$) and less so job involvement ($\beta = -.271$, $p \leq .05$). Perceived career consequence while demonstrating some relationship ($\beta = -.156$, $p \leq .10$) was not as evident as the other two variables.

Discussion of results

It is clear from the results presented that work–life balance is an important concern for employees at different stages of their careers albeit for possibly different reasons. The study is not longitudinal in nature and so the cross-sectional nature of the results allows some insight into potential differences that may exist for employees as they progress through their working lives.

The results present full or partial support for each of the three hypotheses posited. Hypothesis 1 proposed that work–life balance was negatively impacted by high job involvement. Across all four career stages denoted by age it would appear that the more vested an individual is in terms of their job the more less likely they are to achieve work–life balance. This finding is consistent with the extant literature and can be viewed as further evidence of the problems individual employees at all stages in their career progression struggle to come to terms with. While there is evidence of work–life balance being impacted in this manner for the early and developing career stages it is not limited to these groupings alone. It is often tempting to think of early and developing career stage employees as being more involved in their jobs as they attempt to establish themselves within an organisational context. Yet it is clear from our analysis that all cohorts struggle to find and achieve their desired balance whether they be at the very beginning of their career or indeed approaching the end of it.

The research clearly points to the importance of perceived managerial support in terms of impacting positively

upon the work–life balance of employees with hypothesis 2 receiving full support. The existence of a supportive workplace has been identified as critical to the successful implementation and up-take of WLB programs (Thompson et al., 1999) and the role of direct supervisors in supporting their staff in this regard has been highlighted (Galinsky et al., 1996; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Thompson et al., 1999). Interestingly perceived managerial support was found to be significant in term of predicting WLB for employees in the developing and pre-retirement career stages but less so for the early career and consolidating career stage. While most would assume that the perception of managerial support was a crucial element in the decision-making processes of early career stage employees it is interesting to see that it so strongly reported also in the pre-retirement group. It is possible that organisations are underestimating the desire of employees approaching retirement to ease their way into a less demanding working lifestyle.

WLB has traditionally been the preserve of working parents often to the exclusion of older workers but it may now be time to turn our attention to the needs of older workers to ascertain their desires as they move towards exiting the workforce. There is clearly also an economic argument for putting in place supports and policies for older workers in harnessing their skills for longer but also keeping them in paid employment for longer. With an aging workforce and increases in the retirement age of employees in a number of European countries there may be an opportunity now to begin targeting this group in order to ensure their continued engagement and active contribution to organisational success.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that one of the main reasons for employees not availing themselves of WLB initiatives has been the perceived negative career consequences that such a move is likely to have on an individual's career progression. It would appear from our analysis that this perception amongst early career stage employees is very much a real fear with hypothesis 3 receiving partial support in terms of early and developing career stage employees. The research clearly indicates that employees in the early and developing career stages of their career are more mindful of the likely impact that availing of such initiatives may have on their career. There is clear evidence from our research findings that employees beginning their careers perceive that availing of WLB policies or initiatives signals to their employers that they are less committed to their career and therefore such a move is deemed as damaging going forward. Organisations, it would appear, have done little to allay these fears. When one combines this finding with that in relation to perceived managerial support, it is clear that organisations have a role in creating a positive WLB culture.

Consolidating and pre-retirement career stage employees are not concerned with the potential negative career consequences when compared to their younger colleagues. It may be that these two groupings have achieved a level of career success by this point or that they feel that further career progression is unlikely at this point in their career. Either way it would appear that these groups are more concerned with the perceived supportiveness of management in terms of the views they hold in relation to WLB initiatives in general. It would be interesting as a result of this study to examine specifically the views of older employees, particularly those

approaching retirement to ascertain their views on WLB as a means of transitioning out of full-time employment.

Implications for practice

These findings clearly have implications for organizations who wish to foster a culture which values work–life balance. In particular, organizations may need to re-think their policy in relation to work–life balance and more specifically pay closer attention to the needs of employees at differing career stages. If it is the aim of the organisation to maximise the potential positive impact of work–life balance initiatives then a tailored approach is more likely to reap benefits than the prevailing 'one-size fits all' approach that we have witnessed to date. It is likely from our initial analysis that organizations wishing to minimise work–life imbalance among employees should examine the attitudes and work styles of direct managers to ensure that key organizational values in relation to work–life balance are being embraced.

Furthermore, organisations would be wise to redress the imbalance of attention in relation to WLB initiatives which have up to this point tended to focus almost exclusively on the needs of working parents and younger staff members. We argue that there is an equally, if not more compelling argument emerging for attention on pre-retirement employees in order to ensure that they remain within the workforce for longer and that this important source of organisational memory is not lost but rather transitioned in a meaningful manner.

Limitations of the current study

The current study findings should be interpreted with the following limitations. The current study is limited by the use of age as a proxy for life stage. While this has been adopted by a number of previous studies it is recognised that it is a blunt instrument for the measurement of life-stage. Future research should focus on the development and/or expansion of measures of life-stage to overcome this deficit.

The current study is cross-sectional in nature and would benefit from a longitudinal study to confirm the results. The consideration of the effect of possible moderating variables upon work–life balance merits further examination.

The current study examines work–life balance through the lens of the employee only. A matched sample approach examining the employee's and his or her manager's views in relation to work–life balance would be highly desirable.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the differential effects of career stage as denoted by age on the work–life balance of employees within four distinct categories. While this research is seen as an exploratory study, it is clear that examining work–life balance from a career stage perspective can produce valuable insights from both a theoretical and practitioner perspective. It is clear that organisations need to adopt a more tailored approach to work–life balance programmes and initiatives and have the courage to

Table 2 Summary of intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations for scores on work–life balance, job involvement, managerial support and career consequence as a function of career stage/age.

Measure		1	2	3	4	M	SD	Scale Alpha α	Variance
1 Work life balance	Early career stage	–				3.51	1.28	.74	1.19
	Developing career stage	–				3.38	1.32		
	Consolidating career stage	–				3.34	1.26		
	Pre-retirement career stage	–				3.82	1.39		
2 Job involvement	Early career stage	–.186*	–			3.71	1.31	.78	0.5
	Developing career stage	–.204	–			3.41	1.24		
	Consolidating career stage	–.274**	–			3.54	1.46		
	Pre-retirement career stage	–.139	–			3.41	1.13		
3 Managerial support	Early career stage	.327**	–.048	–		5.00	1.08	.70	.07
	Developing career stage	.389**	–.006	–		4.69	1.13		
	Consolidating career stage	.195**	–.095	–		5.07	1.46		
	Pre-retirement career stage	.327**	–.252**	–		4.99	1.20		
4 Career consequence	Early career stage	–.355**	–.046	.385**	–	4.16	1.32	.80	.42
	Developing career stage	–.473**	–.116	.509**	–	4.42	1.33		
	Consolidating career stage	–.203**	–.059	.314**	–	4.49	1.32		
	Pre-retirement career stage	–.188*	–.098	.067	–	4.14	1.47		

Notes: Intercorrelations for each of the career stages as defined by age is shown for each of the measures. Means and standard deviations along with scale reliability and variance scores are presented in the final four vertical columns.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting work life balance from job involvement, managerial support and career consequence.

Predictor	Impact of career stage as defined by age on work life balance							
	Early career stage		Developing career stage		Consolidating career stage		Pre-retirement career stage	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1								
Control variable ^a								
Step 2	.200***		.266***		.144***		.187***	
Job involvement		–.180*		–.166*		–.278***		–.271*
Managerial support		.238*		.208***		.196*		.387***
Career consequences		–.262***		–.339***		–.136		–.156
Total R^2	.200***		.274***		.150***		.190***	
n	174		258		177		111	

^a Control variable; job tenure as defined by length of time in the current role rather than organisational tenure which was measured separately but not included in the analysis. Independent sample t -tests were conducted to compare WLB scores for men and women and separately parents and non-parents within the sample. There was no significant difference in scores for men and women or for parents and non-parents therefore gender and children were not included as control variables.

* $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.

move away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Organisations need to consider new ways to approach the issues and complexities of modern day living for their employees and begin to target specific groups with relevant tailor-made work–life balance initiatives. What has emerged from the study is the absence of attention to the older workers in terms of their work–life balance concerns and this group in particular are therefore deserving of renewed consideration.

Appendix A

See Tables 2 and 3.

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