

Social Impact, Organizations and Society

The Contemporary Role
of Corporate Social Responsibility

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First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-76354-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-77036-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-48095-2 (ebk)

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003480952-8

The Open Access versions of this Chapter was funded by SGH GV;
Wroclaw University.

6 Impact of job (in)security on work–life balance among service sector employees

Agata Austen and Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej

Introduction

Interest in the human aspects of work has been growing for years. Some of the crucial constructs related to these aspects are work–life balance (WLB) and job security (JS). Providing both these elements for employees is one of the areas of social impact of organizations, apart from social impact that is exerted on society (Miller, Buys, & Summerville, 2007). It reflects the social impact of employers associated with beneficial outcomes for employees resulting from prosocial intended initiatives (cf. Rawhouser, Cummings, & Newbert, 2019). The authors cited emphasized that social value related to social impact can be created for employees by meeting their needs.

WLB is defined as an efficient, balanced functioning in both professional and private domains and satisfaction gained from minimizing conflicts between these domains. As Lonska et al. (2021) stated, employees' proficiency in harmoniously integrating their professional roles, family responsibilities, and personal pursuits plays a significant role in fostering a healthy environment for both their employers and their families. This balance not only enhances workplace productivity but also supports the emotional and physical well-being of their loved ones, creating a mutually beneficial situation for all parties involved. Extant literature shows that high levels of work–family conflict (WFC) are reflected in poor self-reported health among employees (Mensah & Adjei, 2020) and negatively affect their performance (Lee, Kim, Park, & Yun, 2013).

One of the factors that may positively influence WLB, thereby increasing the social impact of organizations on their employees, is JS (de Lange & Homburg, 2017), which has been described as a psychological state in which employees expect job continuity within an organization (Salas-Vallina, Alegre, & López-Cabrales, 2021). In turn, job stressors such as job insecurity (JI) that stems from the fear of losing one's present job due to unexpected and uncontrollable reasons (De Angelis, Mazzetti, & Guglielmi, 2021) negatively affect one's private life (De Cuyper et al., 2008). In his literature review, De Witte (2005) distinguished the following factors influencing JI: macro-level factors (e.g., the national

unemployment rate and restructuring in a company), “positional” factors (e.g., level of the position, job seniority), and individual psychological factors.

As the literature shows, the COVID-19 pandemic has decreased both the WLB and JS of many employees (Becker et al., 2022; Johnson, Willis, & Evans, 2019; Lee & Tsai, 2022; Nemteanu, Dinu, & Dabija, 2021; Obrenovic et al., 2021). The pandemic as a novel event exposed the lack of clear procedures guiding employee behavior in the workplace, which is emphasized in event system theory (Lin et al., 2021). However, a major reason why an employee experiences JI is an awareness of the reduction in staff levels by the employer (Gallie et al., 2017). Moreover, the negative relationship between JI and WLB was reported in previous research (Hu, Jiang, Probst, & Liu, 2021; Richter, Näswall, & Sverke, 2010). This relationship was also confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been suggested that JI affects WLB because employees who fear job security may feel pressure to perform beyond explicit job requirements. JI can result in a fear of uncertain income and working hours (Yu, 2014), negatively affecting WLB.

Since previous economic crises as well as the pandemic have also increased the level of concern among employees about their professional future and financial loss (Hamouche, 2020), it is worth examining the impact of JS on WLB in pre-pandemic and post-pandemic times. Additionally, JS and WLB can change over time; however, there is a scarcity of longitudinal studies on WLB (Lee et al., 2022) and JS (Fried et al., 2003).

Moreover, the problem of JS has become a critical issue for employees working in the service sector, but little research has addressed this issue (Mani, Geetha, & Al-Khaled, 2020). There is also a call for exploring this issue in the service sector, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chhabra & Pandey, 2022). As Mani et al. (2020) emphasized, the service sector is still growing, which implies that companies strive to reach high targets. The latter results in pressure on employees to work overtime. Frontline employees in the analyzed sector experience a high level of emotional labor. Moreover, temporary employment is often used in this sector, which increases JI (Shin & Hur, 2019). The consequences of the pandemic have most significantly affected the service sector, which is often based on the physical presence of customers (e.g., restaurants, gyms, tourism, and public administration). Demand for these services has decreased for two reasons. First, some consumers were afraid to use such services because the process of servicing was a potential way of being infected by the coronavirus. In turn, people who were working in the healthcare industry had to work overtime (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Khan, Niazi, Nasir, Hussain, and Khan (2021) noticed that many studies identified the fear of job loss and lack of financial security as the most substantial consequences of lockdowns. However, the closure of schools and kindergartens also had a direct negative impact on WLB (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

In response to the calls presented above, this study aims to assess how the WLB and JS of service sector employees has changed over time, taking into

consideration the following periods: before the pandemic (T0), the pandemic (T1), and after the pandemic (T2). Taking the abovementioned arguments into consideration, the authors formulated five hypotheses:

H1: JS decreased after T0 and increased after T1.

H2: WLB decreased after T0 and increased after T1.

H3: JS at an earlier point in time is related to subsequent JS.

H4: WLB at an earlier point in time is related to subsequent WLB.

H5: JS at an earlier point in time is positively related to subsequent WLB.

This study focuses on service sector employees in Poland. Since repeated observations of the same variables over time enable employers to track the behaviors and trends of WLB on a timely basis, this study applies a longitudinal research approach. Moreover, the authors used a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey method with in-depth interviews. The above constitutes the contribution of this study to the JS and WLB research fields.

Materials and methods

In the first stage of empirical research, a survey was conducted with participants from nine Polish organizations working in different service sectors (e.g., education, information technology, and finance). Similarly to Kinnunen, Feldt, and Bloom (2019), who conducted longitudinal research on employee well-being by sampling different organizations, the authors of the current study wished to include employees from a variety of different jobs.

The survey data was collected in two waves using electronic questionnaires. First, in summer and autumn 2021 (Time 1 – T1), a total of 385 questionnaires were collected. This period reflected the so-called third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, because it was hoped that employees had experienced some changes in WLB and JS during the first year of the pandemic. In completing the survey, respondents were also asked to assess their level of WLB and JS before the pandemic (Time zero – T0). Then, in summer 2022 (Time 2 – T2), those employees who responded in 2021 and who were still employed by the same organizations were contacted. In total, data from 235 respondents were analyzed.

Employees were asked to assess their level of JS using a five-item scale adopted from Salas-Vallina et al. (2021). The items addressed such issues as “I feel that job security is almost guaranteed to me in this job” and “If this organization were facing economic problems, employee downsizing would be the last option used”. WLB was measured using a four-item questionnaire proposed by Brough et al. (2014). The sample questions were: “I currently have a good balance between the time I spend at work and the time I have available for non-work activities”, and “I have difficulty balancing my work and non-work

activities (R)”. Items were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale. For both JS and WLB, Cronbach’s alpha at all points in time was over 0.80.

The average level of variables studied was determined by means of descriptive statistics. Then, correlation analysis was conducted as a preliminary analysis to serve as a basis for the longitudinal analysis. Exogenous variables were chosen on the basis of the values of the Pearson correlation coefficient. In terms of the analysis of results, structural equation modeling (SEM) was implemented using GRETLM. Two-stage least squares regression analysis (TSLS) was used to estimate the structural parameters and stochastic structure of the model. SEM is a two-stage analysis technique, where the measurement model is tested in terms of its validity and reliability in the first stage, and hypothesis testing is undertaken in the second stage.

After analyzing the quantitative data, in-depth interviews with one person from each organization were conducted to obtain explanations of the results. The interviews were recorded and lasted for approximately one hour. The focus was first and foremost on explaining the differences between the prior assumptions and empirical evidence.

Results

The descriptive statistics enabled the authors to test the first and second research hypotheses that relate to changes in the level of JS and WLB over the periods T0, T1, and T2. Although an analysis of the mean values of JS shows the hypothesized trend, and does not confirm it for WLB, it is worth noting that there were groups of respondents who experienced an increase in the level of JS or WLB and the opposite scenario, respectively. For the majority of respondents (51.91%), JS decreased between T1 and T0, but for some of them (13.19%), there was an increase in JS. Comparing data for periods T2 and T1, we can observe an increase in the level of JS (57.7%); yet, 40% of respondents experienced a decrease in JS. Similarly, there were respondents who observed an increase in WLB (20.43% in the period T1–T0 and 49.79% in the period T2–T1). Conversely, for 42.55% of respondents, WLB decreased in the period T2–T1.

To find out whether the changes in the level of analyzed variables were significant, paired samples T-tests were used to examine the differences between T1 and T0 and T2 and T1 for JS and WLB. The values of the T-test for JS0–JS1 ($MV=0.43, p < 0.01$) and for JS1–JS2 ($MV=-0.39, p < 0.01$) make it possible to accept H1. A paired T-test revealed that differences between the mean values of analyzed variables were close to 0 and not statistically significant in the case of WLB. For this reason, H2 cannot be confirmed. The interviewees explained that they experienced lower levels of job security during the pandemic due to a lack of information about the long-term goals of their companies, as well as insufficient training. After the pandemic, the situation stabilized. In the case of WLB, they noticed the benefits of remote working, such as not having to commute to

the office and the possibility of taking care of their children. For some of them, the smaller workload resulted in more time spent on private or personal matters. Supervisor support was also an important issue during the pandemic.

The results of correlation analysis are presented in Table 6.1. As supposed, there is a relationship between WLB in periods T0, T1, and T2, although relationship between WLB in periods T0 and T1 is stronger than in periods T1 and T2. For JS, there is correlation only between periods T0 and T1. There is also correlation between JS0 and WLB0, JS0 and WLB1, and between JS1 and WLB1.

For the two variables studied in the three periods, it was possible to present only one SEM model that consisted of two equations which meet the reliability and validity criteria (AIC 3097.38, p -value <0.01). JST1 as the dependent variable is 42% explained by JST0 (Table 6.2). Thus, hypothesis H3 can be partially supported. The next equation in the model presents JST1 and WLBT0 as determinants of WLBT1. These variables explain 48% of variance in the dependent variable (Table 6.2). Hence, hypotheses H4 and H5 can be partially confirmed as well.

The interviews enabled the researchers to draw the conclusion that in the periods T0–T1, JS was strongly dependent on employer policies. After the pandemic, employees “came out of their employer box” and noticed other employment

Table 6.1 Pearson correlation coefficients

	<i>JS0</i>	<i>JS1</i>	<i>JS2</i>	<i>WLB0</i>	<i>WLB1</i>
JS1	.672**				
JS2	.034	.001			
WLB0	.272**	.177**	.089		
WLB1	.200**	.306**	.049	.675**	
WLB2	.90	.75	.96	.142*	.235**

Source: Own elaboration.

* $p < 05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 6.2 Estimated model values for JST1 and WLBT1 as dependent variables

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>t-ratio</i>	<i>p-value</i>	
Equation 1 – JST1 as dependent variable, R-squared= 0.42					
const	1.37	0.46	2.97	0.0033	***
WLBT1	-0.14	0.13	-1.10	0.2711	
JST0	0.77	0.06	12.45	<0.0001	***
Equation 2 – WLBT1 as dependent variable, R-squared = 0.45					
const	0.85	0.29	2.94	0.0036	***
JST1	0.17	0.05	3.37	0.0009	***
WLBT0	0.61	0.05	11.65	<0.0001	***

Source: Own elaboration.

opportunities on the labor market. Although WLBT1 is dependent on WLBT0 and JST1, there is no similar situation after the pandemic, when the requirements of service employees toward their employers began to emphasize flexibility rather than working conditions.

Discussion

This study advanced the theoretical understanding of the lagged relationships of both JS and WLB at different points in time. As shown, JS of service sector employees decreased after T0 and increased after T1. Therefore, hypothesis H1 has been supported. However, WLB did not decrease after T0 and did not increase after T1, which is evidence for the negative verification of hypothesis H2. Moreover, this study partially confirmed hypotheses H3 and H4 which assumed that JS and WLB at an earlier point in time were positively related to subsequent JS and WLB. Finally, it demonstrated that job security at an earlier point in time was partially positively related to subsequent WLB, which allows for partial confirmation of hypothesis H5.

The results of testing hypothesis H1 support previous studies which found that the pandemic contributed to job security (e.g., Lee & Tsai, 2022; Nemteanu et al., 2021). The lack of JS is not a perception solely caused by one's personality (something “in your head”). It largely results from the “objective” conditions in which people function (De Witte, 2005). In particular, the inability of employers to formulate long-term employment policy reduced the level of JS during the pandemic. Moreover, as revealed in the partially confirmed H3, one's experiences related to JS had an impact only between T0 and T1.

Although the findings related to hypothesis H2 are surprising, it is worth noting that almost 30% of respondents experienced a decrease in WLB during the pandemic. The findings presented support previous results (Becker, Belkin, Tuskey, & Conroy, 2022; Lee & Tsai, 2022), which emphasize the importance of organizational activities aimed at increasing job flexibility (Ortiz-Bonnin, Blahopoulou, García-Buades, & Montañez-Juan, 2022).

This study also reveals a possible change in factors affecting WLB in different conditions which relate to H5 and H4. Previous studies suggested that JS/JI are generally related to WLB (De Cuyper et al., 2008; de Lange & Homburg, 2017). This study confirmed that this relationship existed during a crisis period, yet not after the pandemic. Moreover, the level of WLB in T0 impacted WLB in T1, but there was no impact of WLB in T1 on WLB in T2. This may be due to a change in expectations toward the more flexible organization of their job, but also more security derived from positive changes on the external labor market.

The practical implications for the presented research enrich the area of organizations exerting social impact on their employees. To maintain a high level of JS, companies should provide intensified communication about the future of the company and employees and continue developmental HR activities. WLB

depends not only on JS; therefore, employers should undertake initiatives such as providing a fit between their employees' realities and expectations of remote work (Shirmohammadi, Au, & Beigi, 2022) or offering flexible working hours (Bukowska, Tyrańska, & Wiśniewska, 2021).

The main limitation of the study is the retrospective character of the research that refers to T0. The data was collected in only one country, so the findings cannot be generalized due to possible cultural and situational differences. The other limitation stems from limited variables used in the quantitative research that may explain JS and WLB. Future research may cover other factors that are important to both JS and WLB in the new, post-pandemic environment, which has also been disturbed by the war in Ukraine.

Note

The paper has been developed within the framework of the research project entitled "Work life balance in a (post) pandemic world" funded from the resources of the University of Economics in Katowice.

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