

Using Knowledge Management and Critical Thinking to Understand Thai Perceptions and Decisions towards Work-Life Balance in a Multinational Software Development Firm

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Abstract—Work-life balance has been acknowledged and promoted for the sake of employee retention. It is essential for a manager to realize the human resources situation within a company to help employees work happily and perform at their best. This paper suggests knowledge management and critical thinking are useful to motivate employees to think about their work-life balance. A qualitative case study is presented, which aimed to discover the meaning of work-life balance's meaning from the perspective of Thai knowledge workers and how it affects their decision-making towards work resignation. Results found three types of work-life balance dimensions; a work-life balance including a workplace and a private life setting, an organizational working life balance only, and a work-life balance only in a private life setting. These aspects all influenced the decision-making of the employees. Factors within a theme of an organizational work-life balance were involved with systematic administration, fair treatment, employee recognition, challenging assignments to gain working experience, assignment engagement, teamwork, relationship with superiors, and working environment, while factors concerning private life settings were about personal demands such as an increasing their salary or starting their own business.

Keywords—knowledge management, work-life balance, knowledge workers, decision-making, critical thinking, diverse workforce

I. INTRODUCTION

WORK-life balance has been acknowledged as an important issue in the US and Europe. For example, in the United States, work-life balance was ranked highest among diverse undergraduate and MBA students when asked which career goals were most important to them [4]. In Thailand, the concept of work-life balance is relatively nascent and this often causes significant issues for multinational firms operating with a predominantly Thai workforce. This paper outlines research to understand Thai perceptions towards work-life balance in the knowledge intensive software development industry. An appropriate work-life balance creates employee contentment and people can work best when they feel good about themselves [3].

This is exemplified by Leeds City Council in the UK who received recognition for their approach to work-life balance consisting of nine employee focused policies: annualized hours, compressed hours, employment breaks, flexible working hours, home working, job share, self-rostering, term-time only working and variation in hours.

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Together these resulted in a more satisfied and productive workforce and the subsequent effect of improved recruitment and retention [2].

Work-life balance also has a key effect on staff turnover in terms of the employee decision-making process when considering whether to leave or stay with an organization. Work-life balance should therefore be a key aspect of an effective management strategy to maintain a stable workforce [12].

According to the literature, over the last twenty years research into work-life balance has focused predominantly on developed western countries such as the US and UK, with countries such as Thailand being relatively new to the philosophy and adoption of work-life balance practices into the workplace. This study leverages a case study to investigate the Thai perception towards the concept of work-life balance and what factors influence employees' decision-making when considering whether to leave or stay with a multinational organization. Work-life balance can differ according to specific business areas and associated employees. For example, different factors affect the work-life balance of routine workers versus knowledge workers. In the software industry work assignments are mostly non-repetitive and a creative workforce is essential for a firm to remain competitive. In this sense, software developers are a quintessential representation of knowledge workers and form the basis of the case study and research presented in this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The work-life balance concept

The definition of work-life balance in most literature focuses mainly on how work facilitates life outside the organization. Hyman and Summers [20] describe a balance between work (referring to paid work) in the contractual hours of employment, and unpaid activities, e.g. extended and unexpected travel times and life, including family life and other activities during leisure time. Moore [29] defines work-life balance as a situation in which workers feel they are capable of balancing their work with non-work commitments, while Frame and Hartog, cited in Moore [29], explain that an effective work-life balance is achieved when employees feel they are able to freely use flexible working programs to balance their work with other commitments, e.g. family, hobbies, art, traveling, or studies.

Work and family conflict is often mentioned in connection with work-life balance themes. For instance, Kay [24] conducted a study showing how European families reconcile paid work commitments with the responsibilities of parenting and child rearing. In relation to work and gender themes, Doherty [13] studied the effectiveness of work life balance initiatives in facilitating women's progress to senior management, e.g. longer paid maternity leave, a right to career breaks, a right to work part-time even at senior levels. Straub [37] also puts the focus of her study on maternity leave, while Drew and Murtagh [14] demonstrate differences in the attitudes and experiences of male and female managers in an Irish organization. These studies signify a hidden or implicit assumption in the concept of work-life balance, suggesting that work will be favorable and pleasant only when workers' welfare can be adapted to better match and fit with an employees' personal life outside of work. Hyman and Summers [20] assert that existing studies of work-life balance policies seem to enforce and support business needs and the restriction of employees' voice over the introduction and implementation of policies. The central theme in the literature is that an effective work-life balance should optimize both sides (the benefits for an organization and an employees' career success).

Since most repetitive routine work is now undertaken by modern machinery, today's knowledge-based economy requires creativity and innovation. In this sense, it is likely that a knowledge worker will have more opportunity to undertake meaningful work. Work then becomes a fulfilling part of life and is more than just a job. If work is intellectually challenging, it adds meaning to personal life and in such cases, personal life is enriched and profits from work. As a result, work and life can overlap. Carlson, Derr, and Wadsworth [9] corroborate this by stating that work and life are often interrelated. Unfortunately, few organizations practice effective work-life balance in the organization [8, 28]. For example Hyman and Summers' [20] found seven major problems associated with the current UK practice of work-life balance, namely; the unevenness of adoption across different sectors and organizations; a lack of formalization of policies at the organizational level with largely untrained line managers having discretion over policy application; restriction of employees' voice over the introduction and implementation of policies; policies introduced primarily to meet business needs, rather than those of employees; no evidence of reductions in working hours; tangible and intangible work intrusions into domestic life; and domestic responsibilities still primarily conducted by women irrespective of their employment status. Of note in literature and practice is the fact that to achieve effective work-life balance in an organization, both a manager and employee should be involved in the process. Involving both manager and employee to create an effective work-life balance is particularly difficult for multinational firms operating in foreign countries. In these cases it is necessary to understand the needs and perceptions of the local workforce which are added to the existing work-life balance requirements of knowledge sharing between manager and

employee. Knowledge management therefore has significant potential in allowing all stakeholders of an effective work-life balance to gather, understand and share perceptions and knowledge to develop and maintain a work-life balance in line with employee needs and company requirements.

B. Knowledge management and knowledge workers

International business has expanded globally, with international trade and multicultural cooperation dramatically increasing. Greater opportunities have developed for people from different backgrounds to interact with each other [1]. According to Michailova and Nielse [27], from a knowledge perspective, multinational companies (MNCs) are categorized into one of three dimensions, either a traditional MNC, a MNC as a knowledge network, or a MNC as an e-business. The distinction of these firms implies different kinds of operations and differing features of multinational companies. Strategic, organizational, and instrumental questions regarding knowledge management are recommended for consultants and managers to consider in order to remain competitive in a highly dynamic and changing world [6]. Gorelik [16, p. 126] defines knowledge management as "a framework for applying structures and processes at the individual, group, team, and organizational levels so that the organization can learn from what it knows (and acquire new knowledge if required) to create value for its customers and communities. This knowledge management framework integrates people, process, and technology to ensure performance and learning for sustainable growth." Darroch [11] describes knowledge management as a process that creates or locates knowledge and manages the dissemination and use of knowledge within, and between organizations. Hong and Kuo [19] explain that the purpose of knowledge management is to integrate internal and external knowledge at all times in order to cope with environmental changes, both within and outside the organization, and to solve existing problems as well as innovate for business expansion. In achieving business success through knowledge management, Kalkan [23] points out that human resources departments are vital for knowledge management initiatives. People should be motivated to take an active role in company processes and therefore, human resource management policies must be implemented. Furthermore, the requirements of effective recruitment, selection, training, development, and compensation policies are expected to attract and retain people with the appropriate abilities, behaviors, and competencies that add value to the company. In the knowledge economy, knowledge workers are assets not costs; and for most, a mutual relationship exists, whereby the organization needs them and they need the job that the organization provides. Knowledge workers commonly perform their work autonomously, in that they can define their own tasks and outcomes and are specialized and knowledgeable in their field of work [15]. The ability to make use of professional knowledge, their sense of creativity along with critical thinking skills distinguishes knowledge workers from routine employees. To understand and capture the complexity of work-life balance information from knowledge

workers, critical thinking represents a useful tool. While knowledge management can be leveraged to gather and share work-life knowledge between employees and managers, there is a need for an appropriate framework to process the complexity of knowledge possessed by knowledge workers. This research therefore aims to use knowledge management as a tool to gather and share knowledge related to the perceptions of Thai knowledge workers' perceptions of work-life balance and critical thinking as a theory to deal with the complexity of knowledge provided by these knowledge workers.

C. Critical thinking based on critical theory

Critical theory is based on Marxism for its methods and tools. Being critical means being explainable, practical, and normative; for example, explaining what is wrong with current social reality, identifying actors to change it and providing clear norms for criticism and practical goals for the future. Based on Marxist theoretical concepts, critical theory discusses the ways in which people accept as normal, a world characterized by significant inequities and the systematic exploitation of the many by the few as well as how this might be changed for the better. However, critical theory should not be equated with Marxism. Most key authors in this domain work outside the orthodox Marxian tradition and do not regard capitalism as the enemy [7]. Critical theory is an approach that offers guidance to human action that aims to produce enlightenment and emancipation, a form of knowledge that is multidimensional, avoiding the reduction of knowledge to linear, quantitative-empirical perspectives; it is reflective, opening the doors to new possibilities by exploring unexamined assumptions and comparing these with the resonance of lived experience [10].

Critical theory takes place in the context of the management of change in organizations [10]. An organizational competency model constructed through the use of critical theory offers greater employee and client satisfaction, more effective and efficient service delivery and expanded community involvement through a redefined public interest [22]. The relevance of critical theory to the study of corporate culture is a managerial praxis and organizational discourse [31]. It is also concerned with attempts to show how organizational ideologies operate in resistance to change that is engendered by training [34].

Warnick and Inch, as cited in Petress [33, p.461], reveal critical thinking as "involving the ability to explore a problem, question, or situation; integrate all the available information about it; arrive a solution or hypothesis; and justify one's position." Petress [33] proposed six characteristics of critical thinking: sufficiency, relevance, reliability, consistency, recency and objectivity. Sufficiency is an adequate amount of support for claims. The evidence stated to be relevant to the topic is called relevance. Reliability supports arguments based on trustworthy sources. Consistency occurs when supporting details go along with what is known from other experiences, observations, and sources. Recency describes the support with recent information. Finally, objectivity includes materials that are undistorted and directed by experts.

Employees can face a number of stressful circumstances within an organization. Job-related stress can be caused, for instance, by unclear job expectations and descriptions, short deadlines, responsibility without decision-making authority, routine tasks, racism, sexism, ageism, the growth of multinational firms, and depersonalizing communication in the workplace [21]. Critical reasoning from employees' reflection is beneficial for the company to check the organizational environment. According to Natale and Ricci [30], improving critical thought in the workplace goes a long way to achieving individual and organizational excellence. This can help the organization to foresee the risks of insufficient manpower and plans for recruitment as well as employee retention strategies in the future. In this research, critical thinking is applied to investigate respondents' perceptions towards work-life balance and how it affects their decision to leave or stay with their employer.

The two stands of literature presented so far indicate that to understand knowledge workers' perceptions towards work-life balance, there is a requirement for a framework to understand the complexity of their thoughts (critical thinking) and a need to gather knowledge related to work-life balance and share it between employees and managers (knowledge management). These two aspects are now brought together within a case study to understand Thai perceptions towards work-life balance in a multinational software development firm.

III. METHODOLOGY

Chiang Mai Lanna Business Services, a German-based company operating in Chiang Mai, Thailand, was selected as a case-study of a diverse knowledge-based workforce. The company provides call-center and IT services such as web design and software development. Germans and Thais have a distinct cultural background within their respective contexts of the West and the East, according to the cultural dimension of Hofstede [18]. In addition, software developers in the case study are examples of knowledge workers. The employees ranged in age from twenty to thirty-five years and have a working experience from eight months to five years. With respect to their educational backgrounds, all employees have university training and degrees in the information technology field, specifically in software engineering, computer engineering, graphic design, or computer science. The process of data collection for the study is illustrated in Fig. 1. As shown in Figure 1, there were three main steps in the process of tacit knowledge collection. In step one, a German manager addresses the importance of work-life balance issues to Thai software developers before the questionnaire is handed out.

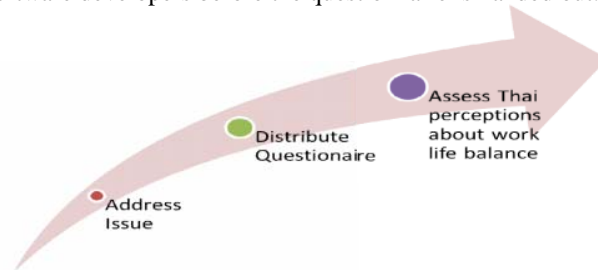


Fig. 1 Process of tacit knowledge collection

In step two, questionnaires were distributed to *Thai employees. The questions were as follows:*

Question 1: What does work-life balance mean to you?

Question 2: How would it affect your future plan working at the company and why?

In step three, the results gained from the questionnaires were analyzed to assess the Thai perceptions towards work-life balance

Throughout the study, critical thinking based on critical theory was employed to ascertain the level of tacit knowledge of Thai software developers working under German management. The study of work-life balance in a Thai environment is relatively new, and thus the first step was to introduce the idea to Thai employees working in a multinational setting to help them better understand the concept. A learning atmosphere and learning forums were fostered by arranging the physical layout of the room to help employees develop critical thinking and discussion about work-life balance from their own perspectives. Following this, questionnaires were distributed to understand eleven Thai employees' personal perceptions regarding work-life balance. The first part of the questionnaire requested personal information from the respondents. Two main questions then specifically focused on work-life balance definitions in the minds of respondents and the probability of making decisions about leaving or remaining with the company in the near future, as well as the factors influencing their ideas about leaving or remaining with the company. In addition, the responses from the questionnaires were analyzed to understand dimensions of work-life balance in the minds of the Thai software developers working in a diverse workforce.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Work-life balance definitions in Thai software developers' perceptions are discussed in this section. Their expressions are mainly grouped according to the settings of work-life balance, including workplace and private settings. In the results, T stands for each Thai software developer from the first to the eleventh respondent. Three categories of work-life balance were found: a work-life balance both inside and outside the workplace, a work-life balance in an organizational setting only and a work-life balance outside the workplace. Pertinent quotes demonstrating work-life balance opinions were derived from responses in the questionnaires. These quotes along with the three categories of work-life balance are shown in Table I. The first group of Thai software developers demonstrates that work-life balance for them contains two spheres: the workplace and private life. The second group expressed that work-life balance for them focuses on the organization only, whereas the third thought that work-life balance is about a private life only.

TABLE I
THE THREE DISTINCT ATTITUDES TO WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS CAPTURED BY THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Group 1: work- life balance including workplace and private life settings.
T2. "to spend life happily meanwhile work happily; not too much concentrated on neither life nor work"
T3. "have enough time for a private life; have enough time to accomplish work; have a happiness in life and work; working on assignments that fits to my favorite, talent, responsibility, wages; begin a day with a thought about what can I carry out; not to live a life without goals"
T6. "balance is lying between a daily life and a job that is to my favorite and to get good earning."
T7. "to allot enough time for work and rest; sometimes to put an energy into work is necessary"
T8. "to have time for family and provide a good result of work"
T9. "work fully and rest fully"
Group 2: organizational work- life balance only
T4. "to have a work balance that contains no working pressure; relaxation is required during the job because duties and responsibilities are overload and quite difficult to deal with"
T10. "to allot time correctly; should not take an account of life into work"
T11. "to work in a good place, to have a position that fit to myself; to get along well with colleagues and bosses"
Group 3: work-life balance in private life setting only
T1. "having freedom to spend life, work less and earn a reasonable income, have a free time to rest, to stay with a family and friends"
T5. "a work that does not have an intrusion into a private life"

Based on these three different perspectives regarding the meaning of work-life balance, the eleven Thai employees made varied decisions to leave or remain with the company. These decisions are outlined below and shown in Table II.

A. The decision to stay

The Thai software developers made decisions whether to continue working with the company because of factors of work-life balance within the organization.

B. The decision to leave

The decision-making process to leave is influenced by work-life balance within the organization as well as the work-life balance outside the workplace.

C. Hesitating making the decision to leave or to stay

Decision-making to leave or stay can be influenced by issues of work-life imbalance within the organization as well as work-life balance issues outside the workplace.

TABLE II
DECISIONS ON WHETHER TO STAY OR LEAVE THE COMPANY AS CAPTURED FROM QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

Decision to stay because of work life balance within the organization factor
T11 "I work happily because the job I engaged with is alright."
Decision to leave because of an organizational work life balance
T1 "want to work with a company that has a systematic administration, a fair treatment, and regard the importance of employees or want to establish my own business; to become a self- employed"
T4 "sometime when I don't have an assignment to do or when I feel bored, I have a feeling to work in another field that I am able to work and learn so that I can increase my experience and a new knowledge from work."
Decision to leave due to balancing work -life outside the workplace

T9 "want to have an increased salary or to become a self-employed"

Decisions to leave or stay due to the organizational work-life balance

T2

Leave: "I cannot stand the unfair treatment anymore"

Stay: "I love my job and I start to like it more everyday"

T3

Leave: "I have worked for a long time. Sometimes I feel that the work is repetitive; not various. I want to have an experience with other types of assignments."

Stay: "have an excellent teamwork, get along well with bosses who have a good leadership – not egotistic. Foreign bosses are friendly and sympathetic. It makes me feel confident that I can gain these positive atmosphere and environments much more than I work with the Thai company. Moreover, I have a close and nice relationship with all Thai friends."

Decision to leave or stay due to work-life balance outside the workplace

T10

Leave: "salary is not enough for my personal expenses"

Stay: "I like this company"

The three dimensions of work-life balance all affect the decision making of software developers to leave or remain with the company. According to the result of questionnaires, the comments from respondents show that their decisions to leave or stay, are affected by organizational work-life balance factors such as systematic administration, fair treatment, employee recognition, challenging assignments to gain work experience, assignment engagement, teamwork, relationship with superiors, and working environment. Unlike work-life balance related to life outside the working environment, inside the working environment it is noticeable that the reasons signify personal demands, for example, to earn more money or to start one's own company.

Critical thinking showed that for Thai software developers, work-life balance has alternative meanings. A foreign manager can adopt employees' work-life balance perceptions and reflections to improve human resource strategies. When the employees decide that they want to continue working with the company, this shows that either the organizational work-life balance, or a work-life balance in the private sphere supports employees' work and life happiness. Thus, a foreign manager can feel assured in terms of retaining these knowledge workers.

The group, who indicated uncertainty about leaving or staying indicates that there might be issues with work-life balance which need to be identified and addressed. However, these problems may be serious enough to warrant immediate resignation due to their hesitation in answering. If their problems are recognized and solved in time, they may be willing to continue working with the company due to a positive relationship between the workers and the company. Foreign managers should be especially concerned about the at risk group who intend to leave. The root cause of the problems should be seriously investigated to retain knowledge workers in the workplace.

Considering the definitions of work-life balance given by group one and group two (see Table I), the reflections of the respondents indicate that working creates a sense of self-

worth. This is evident from the perspective of Thai culture, where having a profession provides meaningful and honorable pride. To work and be an expert in a particular job helps to define that person. Such individuals are well known in their profession and will be greeted by an appropriate designation as opposed their real names. Examples would be "Khun mor (literally 'Mr/Ms doctor' or "Khun kru (literally 'Mr/Ms teacher'). The professionals discussed in this study, are known as "Nakpattana-software" ('software developer'). In this regard, Komin [25] asserts that Thais consider social recognition as one of the main motives for achievement in their lives. It is also interesting to note that in a developed country like Germany, people are generally not referred to by the profession they work in, although some German family names represent what one's ancestors did in the past. For example, "Schmidt" refers to people who work with iron, a "Muller" is a person who grinds grain, "Meier" is a person who collects milk, a "Schuhmacher" is a shoemaker, a "Kaufmann" is a businessman, and a "Schneider" is a tailor. Hence, the perceptions towards work-life balance reflect how people judge the value of their work and depends significantly on where they put the weight of balance, on either their work, their private life, or even on both.

V. CONCLUSION

The combination of knowledge management and critical thinking is a useful means for a foreign manager to gather knowledge regarding work-life balance conditions among the current local employees of a company so they can plan for human resource improvement. In the case study presented in this paper, work-life balance is interpreted in a variety of ways, and reasons given about the possibility of employees staying or leaving a company in the future can be taken as basic information for a manager to foresee each employee's future work probability with a company. For Thai software developers in the case study, most thought that work-life balance should include the workplace and the private setting. Some of them viewed work-life balance only in an organizational setting, whereas a minority defined work-life balance only in a private setting. From work-life balance definitions, employees' work attitudes and relationships with the organization reflect how much work means for each employee. The driving force for leaving or continuing work with the organization were influenced by both organizational work-life balance and work-life balance in a private setting. Furthermore, this study shows only Thai perceptions towards work-life balance and decisions to leave or stay in the case of a German-based multinational software company. It would be more practical for a German manager in terms of a managerial perspective to find out the root causes of work-life imbalance among Thai employees. This represents an opportunity for future research. Based on root cause analysis, a foreign manager could better understand work-life imbalance and find appropriate methods to reduce risk in terms of losing the best performers as well as helping Thai employees reach a better state of work-life balance in a diverse workforce.

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