Work-life Imbalance of IT professionals in Kerala

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Abstract

Information Technology occupies a strategic place in Indian economy. Technology has revolutionized the world as never before. Information Technology is integrated with every sphere of life and becomes an essential ingredient in modern education. The contribution of IT sector is significant in terms of employment generation, revenue, foreign exchange earnings, standard of living etc. and has played a major role in placing the country in the global canvas. In IT sector, there is tremendous scope for employment and career opportunities for many young educated Indians, but it offers new types of challenging careers in different work environments. The emergence of IT sector had made extra ordinary changes in work place and families. Women also occupy a prominent position in IT labour force. Working women are struggling with multiple responsibilities at work, heavy meeting schedules, business trips etc. The changing phenomenon makes some problems in managing a balance between their work-life and personal life. While much study has been conducted on the history, growth and contributions of IT sector, only a few studies are conducted on the mental and health issues of professionals in IT sector. The present article tries to focus on the peculiarities of employment in IT sector and work-life imbalance of Information Technology professionals in Kerala.

Key Words: Work-life imbalance, IT professionals

Introduction

In the new millennium, global economy will be governed by Technology and Telecommunication and Information Technology is the world's fastest growing economic activity and it occupies a strategic place in Indian economy. Information Technology is integrated with every sphere of life and becomes an essential ingredient in modern education. The contribution of IT sector is significant in terms of employment generation, revenue, foreign exchange earnings, standard of livings etc.

and has played a major role in placing the country on the global canvas. There is tremendous scope for employment and career opportunities, but this sector offers new types of challenging careers in different work environment.

The development experience of Kerala received much international acclaim due to its unique pattern of development. High level of social development in Kerala is disproportionate to its low GDP growth, low capital formation, poor prospects of the manufacturing sector, high unemployment, severe threats faced by agricultural and traditional sectors. Educated unemployment is another serious issue in Kerala Economy. Productive employment of youth is an essential factor for economic development. Unemployment Rate in youth in Kerala is much higher than that of the overall population and it reveals the severity of unemployment problem among the youth in Kerala.

India's image has been transformed from a slow moving bureaucratic economy to a global player in world class technology. Knowledge based economy of India has changed the country to a fast moving employment generator. The Indian IT Sector has grown considerably over the last decade to contribute over 6% of the country's GDP. In 2016, NASSCOM expects the industry to add revenues of USD 20 billion to the existing industry revenues of USD 146 billion. Export revenues for FY 2016 are projected to grow by 12-14% and domestic revenues will grow at 15-17%. In last fiscal years, the industry adds 1,60,000 employees and provided direct employment to 3.1 million people and indirect employment to 10 million people and is poised to become an economic superpower by 2020. IT has been showing a consistently upward trend since the 1990's.

In this context, in Kerala, IT sector is considered as a huge hope, engine of growth and a huge push to the state's economy. Increase in salary and difference in work environment attract more professionals to IT sector even at their younger age. Therefore the conditions of IT sector in order to decipher the quality of employment are important. The concept of work life balance has become redundant. Today, it's all about 'blending' and not 'balancing 'the personal with the professional field. The past 20 years have seen extraordinary changes in our workplaces and families. Women have entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers and improved their earnings relative to men. Today working women in India are continually challenged by the demands of full-time work and when the day is done at the office, they carry more of the responsibilities and commitment to homes. Working women are juggling between multiple responsibilities at work, heavy meeting schedules, business trips, in managing the daily routine responsibilities of career and home. The changing phenomenon increases anxiety among working women where they have to manage their family and work and need to strike a balance between their work life and the personal life. Employment in IT sector is often considered as very prestigious and

highly remunerative. IT sector is characterized by long working hours, deadlines for projects, overtime work, lack of enjoyment facilities etc. This adversely affects IT professionals resulting in work-life imbalance, disturbances in family life and different types of health issues. However, a close examination of the nature of employment in IT sector reveals that the quality of working conditions is questionable. In this context, the present paper makes an attempt to examine the employment pattern of IT sector as compared to other traditional sectors in Kerala and to study   the work-life balance of IT professionals in Kerala.

Objectives

1. To examine work pattern in IT sector in Kerala

2. To analyze the reasons for work-life imbalance in IT sector

Research Methodology

For a detailed analysis of the work-life balance of IT professionals in Kerala, relevant data were collected from 300 professionals working in various IT firms in Techno park in Thiruvananthapuram district. For identifying the respondents, method of Snow ball sampling was employed. Snow ball sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which when we get one respondent, the respondent gives information about other respondents and it progresses as a chain. Relevant information was collected by using a structured interview schedule. For analyzing primary data simple statistical tools such as averages and percentages were used.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Before examining the work-life balance of IT professionals, it is worthwhile to understand the pattern of employment in IT sector. The evolution of computer and IT is perhaps one of the most dominating factors in the ever changing work-life today. IT industry in India got tremendous boost in the past decades due to factors like liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy coupled with favorable government policies. The Indian workforce in IT has earned an image of 'low cost' but 'high quality' technical workers, helping Indian IT industry to keep a promising growth rate.

Work in the IT industry is characterized by a number of distinctive labour market features such as flexible working schedules, firm project deadlines, influential foreign clients, frequently in different time zones from the service provider , as well as customized support and maintenance. Work in an IT company tends to be less laborious in a physical sense and can be more intellectual in nature. But it has many

specific features that may have adverse effects: long working hours, flexibility in work, volatile business conditions, high client dependency, work-life imbalance, higher remuneration but a high attrition rate. These are all some of the common notions about work life in IT companies. Today it promotes opportunities to men and women to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity. Technically qualified youth as well as the general public perceive employment in IT industry as highly remunerative, productive , stable and safe and as a key to secure future. Today IT industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of Indian economy and has been increasingly contributing to India's GDP and export revenues. IT industry holds a promising future for the young and technically skilled generation.

Majority (81.5 percent) of IT professionals is in the age group between 22 to 30 years and the mean age of the employees is 26 years. These young generation workers are techno-savvy, aware of market realities and opportunities, they in general have a different mindset towards job and career. Factors like lack of advancement in career, high workload, employee morale, risk involved in decision making, and organization climate lead to stress among them. They have high aspirations for career, expectations from job and are ready to take risk. Salary, like other sectors, is still one of the prime drivers for switching jobs. The average starting compensation to IT professional in India is around Rs. 15,000 per month, which is high compared to other sectors.

The workforce in IT faces its unique challenges. Work-related stress is currently one of the greatest challenges to the health of working people and to the healthiness of their work organizations. The IT industry in India brought a new work environment and sea changes in the employment trends. Service providers characterized this sector by adhering to strict deadlines set by their customers, working in different time zones, interdependency in teams, multitasking, increased interaction with offshore clients and extended work hours. IT professionals are constantly under pressure to deliver the services efficiently as well as to remain cost effective.
These working conditions lead to high stress in the professionals.

This sector is very volatile and faces the problem of lack of job security and constant up gradation of skills to remain marketable. The skills in this sector are becoming obsolete at a rate of 20 percent per year. Stress is the worst hazard of their workplace and repetitive strain as the next greatest problem. The working conditions in the IT profession is becoming very stressful with average working hours extended to 50 hours per week, working on saturdays and sundays and not being able to take leave when sick. Increased workload, constant changes at work, reduced staff and

long working hours affect not only employees but also the employers. The widespread nature of stress in IT has given rise to the term 'techno-stress'.

The advent of IT can change the concept of work, especially for women. Now women are occupying a prominent position in IT and their numbers are increasing. The newly emerging trends like flexi timings and work at home will attract more women to this sector. This encourages women to take up professional courses that promised secure careers. IT attracts women and their contribution is significant in the growth and development of the sector. Most of women get concentrated in entry level jobs and only 5% of them are actually climbing the organizational hierarchy. After a few years of working, a few women quit from employment. Major reasons for career breaks of women professionals include socio- cultural contours, structural factors like lack of flexible working option, lack of support systems at home, long working hours, poor day care and nursing facilities, pressure or request from family, long working hours, night shifts, lack of growth opportunities etc. It also include personal factors like health issues and desire to pursue higher studies etc.

The most promising jobs available to young, urban, educated women are in Information technology. The valid criticism is that such jobs exploit young Indians who have a degree. In IT sector, many are under- utilizing higher education qualifications and doing low-level work. Many of the jobs are stressful, monotonous, and hazardous to health and subject to heavy surveillance, although masked with a charming exterior. Sometimes, customers are rude and abusive to workers and at the same time, jobs in call centres and BPO agencies pay fantastically well. Although the IT sector jobs have changed the structure of career opportunities for educated young people, there are several objections to these kinds of jobs. One is that these jobs exploit and demean people. Women have limited bargaining power in the electronic industry due to the absence of trade unions.

In IT industry, career development takes place through hard work, training, application and continuity in learning. Even though, women employed in IT belong to the younger age group, the majority of women quit from job due to the problem of work life imbalance. At this age, women's responsibility at home is at its highest and there is a clash between home responsibilities and career development. This industry also requires long hours of work. In IT field, it is necessary to have continuous training for upgradation of skills, if once they have burnt out of the labour market for some time find their skills obsolete. Although men and women started on an equal footing, women had slower career progress as compared to men. Fewer women had fast track careers as compared to men.

Work-life balance is an important and nowadays, this has become a serious issue. There is a drastic change in the nature of work and work environment and this makes an imbalance in work-life. This leads to dissatisfaction and disappointment

among employees and it will negatively affect their mental and physical well-being and also career development. Since the employees have to work for long hours at workplace, they get only less time to spend in family. Due to these imbalances, most of highly qualified women quit from job after starting family life.

Even though, IT employees enjoy all most modern facilities and work is physically risk free but working longer hours, stress due to deadline pressures, satisfying their clients and lack of leisure and physical exercises negatively affect the mental well-being of employees. This may lead to more health issues like backaches, eye strain, cervical spondylitis, insomnia and depression. This may cause the work-life imbalance of professionals. The flexi-time work culture in IT sector also leads to long hours of work which negatively affects work-life balance of the employees. In IT sector, promotions and climbing of job ladder are entirely different from other sectors. There do not exist any standardized norms. Since promotions are purely based on employee's performance appraisal, they work hard and also maintain satisfactory client relationships, effective communication and service delivery, frequent overstays to ensure project completion just –in –time etc. This over work may disturb work-life balance of professionals.

Table1
Work pattern in IT sector (Percentage)

Wok Environment	Overall
Inadequate earnings	65.8
Longer working Hours	66.51
Monotonous work, tight deadlines, job stress, too much work pressures	46.72
Contractual employment relationship	49.72
Flexi-time work	80.29
Job insecurity	56.4
Absence of trade union& labour laws	35.89
Inadequate social security measures	32.22
High Client dependency	29.92
No rule bound job hierarchy	11.43
Wages tied to business cycles	16.32
Frequent travel abroad	7.38
Bond	10.47
Gender Discrimination	14.41
Over exploitation &Lack of leisure time	49.15
Health Problems	69.08

Source: Sample Survey

Reasons for Work-life Imbalance in IT sector

The main reasons for work-life imbalance can be analysed by using the following criteria.

- Time devoted to Family

- Long working Hours

- Health problems

- Flexi time Work

- Trade Union

Time Allocation for Family

Long working hours is a serious issue in IT sector which negatively affects the physical and mental health of the employees. This also disturbs work-life balance of an employee which is an important indicator of 'decent work'. Most of the IT employees opines that time devoted to children, spouse, parents, social life and self enjoyment is inadequate.

Table 2

Average time allocation in hours (per day)

Firm Type	Category of Time Allocation				
	Children	Spouse	Parents	Social life	Own enjoyment
Overall	1.28	1.29	1.25	1.28	1.28

Source: Sample Survey

The Table 2 explains the IT professionals' inadequacy of time allocation for family purpose. Regarding all categories of time allocation, public sector employees get more time than the private sector employees.

Details of Work-life Balance

Work-life balance denotes the maintenance of perfect balance between individual life and professional life that may lead to job satisfaction and excellence in job.

Table 3
Work life balance (Percentage)

Work Life Balance	Overall
Longer working hours and flexi time work	61.06
Health problems due to nature of work	77.02
Absence of workers Union	62.02
Night Shifts	28.15
Lack of socializing with relatives, friends etc.	65.29
Lack of recreations	63.81

Source:Sample Survey

Table 3 shows the work life balance of IT professionals. It is important to note that more than 60 percent of IT professionals reported that they have health problems due to the nature of work and they also have long working hours and flexi time work. Also they are of the opinion that lack of socialization and recreation, absence of trade union also affect their work-life balance.

According to IT professionals in the sample, long working hours lead to deterioration of their physical and mental health and disturbances in work-life balance. The problem of work life balance is the second major effect of long work duration and its extent is more or less same among public and private employee categories.

Health Problems from Career

Excessive work and longer working hours have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental health of the worker. In IT sector, professionals have to work more than 9 hours. Even though, work in IT sector is physically risk free, it negatively affects the well-being of the employee. This leads to a number of physical health problems like frequent backaches, eye strain, cervical spondylitis and insomnia. This also has huge impact in the mental health of the employees. Many of them suffer from depression, anger, excessive stress and overall a negative attitude to entire life. This affects the employees' overall performance and promotion chances in his/her career. Health problems also negatively affect the family life, hence makes a reflection in the work-life balance of the employees.

Table 4

Health Problems of Workers (Percentage)

Health Problems	Total
Eye strain/ weak eyesight	40
Frequent backaches	31.5
Cervical spondylitis	6.5
Obesity	4
Depression	3.5
Insomnia	4
Stress/ mental strain	10.5
Any other(please specify)	0
Total	**100**

Source:Sample Survey, 2016

Eye strain and weak eyesight are the major health problem faced by both public and private employees followed by incidents of frequent backaches. In this survey, it can be understood that suffering is high in private sector than in public sector. Stress or mental strain is another area of concern, which is high in private than in public.

Spending of Leisure Time

Spending of leisure time denotes the ways in which IT employees utilize their free time. This has an important place in determining whether they are getting enough time for recreation and entertainments. As per the Decent Work norms, availability of enough leisure time will increase the quality of their work.

Table 5

Spending of Leisure Time

Spending of Leisure time	Nature of Ownership
	Over all
Visiting shopping malls	27.10
Watching films	37.10
Socializing with relatives, club, friends	11.90
Visit Tourist places	10.72
Yoga, Swimming, Other health practices	13.18
Total	**100**

Source: Sample Survey, 2016

In Table 5, it is quite clear that the respondents mainly spend their leisure time by watching films. Visiting shopping malls is another major pass time When we compare the results of spending of leisure time of IT sector employees , it can be seen that public sector employees getting comparatively more leisure time than private sector IT employees.

Trade Unions in IT Sector

One of the main features of Private IT sector is the absence of trade unions. But in public sector Trade Unions are present to some extent. In IT sector, absence of trade unions explains the void of an agency with which the problems of the employees may be solved. Due to the tight work schedules and highly modernized self-contained work in IT sector , IT professionals never think of the necessity of union. Presence of trade unions in IT sector will ensure decency of work to some extent by ensuring fundamental principles of employees.

Table 6
Trade Unions in IT Sector (Percentage)

Trade Unions	Total
Yes	28.34
No	71.67
Total	**100**

Source: Sample Survey

As shown in Table 6, 72 percent of the employees answered that there is no trade unions in IT sector. To address the new problems and challenges to ensure the protection of workers and a future devoid of poverty, destitution, deprivation and injustice, there is an urgent need of trade unions in the new economic environment

CONCLUSION

Work- Life Balance determines the quality of a person's life and that may ultimately leads to the quality of a society. The perfect balance between life and work increase the quality of employment that may end up in producing better results. Long working hours and flexi time are two key features of IT in private sector. Even though, the flexi time is treated as a convenient method for the employee, it actually becomes a reason for work –life imbalance. Demands of IT work that means necessity for promotion, target completion and satisfactory work client relation forces the employees to overstay in office that may ultimately leads to work-life imbalance. There is more work-life imbalance in IT sector. There is the problem of longer working hours in majority of companies because of the pressure of deadlines. Work at home is presented as an option, but it can be found as a way for exploitation than work at a fixed place. Increase in the suicide rates among professionals is a reflection of the problems in IT sector. Other entertainments are denied because of longer hours of work and this adds stress to the employees. Night shifts, Monotonous work and frequent journey to foreign countries are the other factors which disturb the family relationships of the employees. Frequent travel creates problems for working women due to their family ties.Night shifts and long working hours lead to frequent health problems and this may further aggravate the situation and the employee may be led to even states of depression. There is job insecurity because of companies' policy of terminating their employees even though they are high in performance and excellence. Because of long experience, companies are forced to pay high salary, for avoiding this, owner companies lay off (terminate) their employees without any prior information. Companies are doubly benefitted by selecting youngsters for their firms. The youngsters are always low paid because of their lack of experience and the companies get more benefit from them because of their young age. At the time of their recruitment, they have to sign

bonds and these bonds become a chain for the employees. Bonds prevent employees from migrating to other companies within a stipulated period, so they have to suffer meekly even if there is discrimination. Absence of trade union and labour laws create serious problems since there is a lack of an agency which hears complaints from employees. Married women face problems in protecting their children and home responsibilities along with their profession. This prevents them from showing excellence in their fields. They become poor performers and this affects their promotions and salary hikes. There is also the absence of social security measures like Pension and Provident Fund, which are high in Public than in Private sectors since majority of the new recruits are on contract basis.

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