
Introduction

Current State of Work-Life Balance Measures and Bottlenecks to the Stabilization of Measures

Today, many firms are making the effort to introduce the so-called “work-life balance measures” to allow employees to balance their work and life, correct long working hours, and enable workers to manage both employment and their roles in their families, such as their role in parenting, etc. Consequently, the introduction of the measures has progressed to a certain extent.

In particular, the “child care leave system,” which is a main focus of this feature, is one of the major work-life balance measures that was introduced to allow workers to balance work and family life (parenting). As Takeishi describes in detail in the feature, over 10 years have already passed since companies were obligated under a series of legal frameworks to make the system available to workers, and much has been achieved in terms of spreading this system. According to figures quoted by Sakai, the Basic Survey on Women’s Employment Management conducted in 2005 found that more than 60% of companies had introduced the child care leave system. Yet, as Takeishi points out, even though the percentage of female workers who take child care leave is on the increase, it still remains at around 10%, which is a small percentage even considering that about 40% of firms have not introduced the system.

Under these circumstances, can it be said that the system has taken root within companies after more than 15 years since it was first introduced? If taking root is considered as a state where the system is accepted as a natural measure by those concerned within companies, is smoothly utilized in workplaces, and generates favorable results for both the management and workers, then it must be said that the system is far from having taken root. And for this very reason, government-related organs claim further efforts are needed to ensure that the system, as a major work-life balance measure, take root.

In this feature, we compiled papers that clarified, through detailed research,

the key points that need to be considered for child care leave to take root. These studies all try to identify the bottlenecks that when clarified would contribute to the stabilization and utilization of the measure. The findings from the papers are summarized below.

The first point is the role that the understanding and support of supervisors to the intent and importance of work-life balance measures introduced by personnel departments play in helping to promote the utilization of such measures at workplace. On this point, Wakisaka shows that when compared with the willingness of the management and personnel departments to implement child care leave, supervisors have little understanding of the system and are less inclined to actively support it. For example, even at companies that replied that their personnel departments were actively assisting in work-life balance, only about half of all supervisors at those companies replied that they would “actively support” employees who apply for a child care leave.

The second point is how workers who take advantage of work-life measures and child care leave (mostly female workers) are affected as regards their performance rating and career prospects. The negative effect on a worker’s performance rating and career development may be one of the factors inhibiting the use of the system. Wakisaka provides us with data suggesting that when supervisors appraise women who took child care leave, they often regard taking child care leave as a negative point in the appraisal.

From the point of view of career development, Takeishi shows that child care leave and other work-life balance measures promote employment of female employees and subsequent long-term employment facilitate their promotion to managerial posts. Atsumi also reports similar results.

Takeishi, and more directly, Kodama, however, report that results indicate that while introduction and administration of the child care leave system promotes long-term employment of female workers who are already employed by companies, it decreases recruitment of new female workers as companies have to bear the costs of employing women who have entered the period of parenting. Kodama, in particular, looks at measures for child care leave as well as the percentage of employees taking child care leave and makes it clear that companies where the percentage is high, in other words, where progress is

being made in the utilization of child care leave, are reducing the number of women they recruit. It can be said that while it is favorable to the careers of those women who are already employed, the findings are problematic for employment of women as a whole.

It must be added, however, that Takeishi also shows that even when companies bear the parenting costs of their employees, such reduction in the demand for female labor as mentioned above will be less pronounced when female employees are given sufficient opportunities to develop their careers and skills. Kodama also reports of results that indicate that reduction in the recruitment of women will not occur at companies where there is significant wage disparity based on individual workers' performance. These results suggest that work-life balance measures will take root only when they are integrated into comprehensive strategies for effective utilization of both female and male human resources.

The third point is the benefits that work-life balance measures bring to companies. Many have argued, from the point of view of the management, that unless this point is elucidated, there can be little expectation for full-fledged implementation of such measures and for those measures to take root. On this point, Wakisaka shows that companies with both a high degree of family friendliness (an indicator of the degree to which work-life balance measures are made available) and a high degree of equal opportunity (an indicator of the degree of equal treatment between men and women) have larger sales (surrogate indicator for productivity) and ordinary profit per employee. Atsumi also indicates that companies that are more advanced in providing support for work-life balance have faster sales growth compared with other companies.

Moreover, from interviews conducted on more than 300 companies, Atsumi suggests that companies actively promoting measures for work-life balance induce short-term benefits of recruiting competent individuals and retaining employees, mid-term benefits of having their employees align their viewpoints more closely to those of their clients (because they understand consumers' viewpoints), and long-term benefits of bringing about reform of corporate culture and review of organizational and operational systems, which will in turn enhance the companies' competitiveness. These findings should act as

incentives for managers to introduce systems for work-life balance.

The fourth and last point is the question related to whether work-life balance measures, which were introduced mainly as measures for helping women, would be expanded to cover male employees. When work-life balance measures and particularly the child care leave system are no longer measures simply for supporting women but are applicable to men as well, it might be possible to say, for the first time, that the concept of work-life balance as a reform in the way people work has taken root. In this respect, it is important to explore factors behind the extremely low percentage of men who take child care leave (around 1% at best).

On this point, Sakai shows that more than a third of male employees who have entered the period of parenting or who are about to start parenting wish to take advantage of the child care leave system, and suggests that the factors preventing them are the long working hours and the rigidity of the child care leave system itself. The results show that if the system is designed to allow employees to take leave more flexibly, many men would be willing to participate in parenting even if it meant sacrificing work a little.

In the above, I have extracted from the papers compiled for this feature the key points that need to be considered in having work-life balance measures and particularly the child care leave system take root within companies and in promoting the use of such measures by male and female workers. Each of these points has important implications in terms of policy and companies' personnel management (particularly in bringing about change in the perceptions of people at the workplace). By identifying each bottleneck that prevents work-life balance measures from taking root and overcoming it, these measures will actually take root not only as personnel measures but also as a basic concept in the utilization of human resources within companies in Japan. In closing this introduction to this feature, I would like to express my sincere hope for continued effort to be made in carrying on with detailed analysis for work-life balance measures to take root.

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