

? Work-life balance and boundary autonomy: to activate employees and organizations

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VII Work-life balance and boundary autonomy: to activate employees and organizations

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1. Introduction

Some time ago, the Japanese were often mocked for being “economic animals” or “worker bees” for their working style. They were said to spend all of their time at work without enjoying their private lives – a situation enforced by a “work is a virtue” cultural norm. In the 1980’s, when Japanese companies became economic competitors on the global stage, their longer working hours, vis-à-vis that of their foreign competitors, became the focus of criticism of “unfair competition”.

The situation, however, has been changing. The Japanese working hour has been gradually diminishing and currently stands at around 1,840 hours a year. The 2004 figure by the *Monthly Labour Survey* is almost the same as that of the UK and the USA. So far as publicized working hours statistics are concerned, it seems that the Japanese are no longer “economic animals”. However, even now, many Japanese employees, and probably many outside observers interested in this matter, think that Japanese employees continue to suffer from long working hours and cannot achieve a balance between work and life spheres. Under such conditions, an interest in a work-life balance has been spreading in Japan (Osawa, 2006), though the degree of progress has been modest.

Given the present situation, can Japanese workers realize their full potential in the work place? The answer is probably “no”. Without a well-balanced work life, it seems impossible. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the current situation of work-life balance in Japan, which will lead to the development of studies on the activation of employees and organizations. The premise here is that employees who are not satisfied at their work places cannot reach their full potential – that is, to become fully activated. One of the biggest obstacles preventing them from doing is the issue of working time, which is closely related to work-life balance matters discussed further in this paper. In the following, the possibility of the spread of the work-life balance notion in Japan will be mentioned and the importance of a new concept, “boundary autonomy”, as a way of viewing work-life balance matters will be ascertained.

There have been many precedent studies on work-life balance, including those on work-family balance (Behson, 2005; Clark, 2000; Dallimore and Mickel, 2006; Friedman et al., 2000; Guest, 2002; Hall and Richter, 1988; Hyman et al., 2003; Kirchmeyer, 2000; MacInnes, 2005; Perlow, 1998; White et al., 2003). However, there is no common qualitative or quantitative standard for a well- balanced situation between work and life. The author does not attempt to prescribe a “best balance”, as that would be a subjective standard that varies greatly from person to person. Fitzpartcick (2004, p.350) regards work-life balance as “the capacity of individuals to choose the appropriate balance between employment and non-employment activities with a minimum of conflict between the two”. It seems better for us to leave “best balance” design up to individual choice and capacity, rather than trying to devise a model that fits public standards. Additionally, what work and life spheres mean is not precisely defined in this paper. These are roughly defined concepts, where work sphere is the realm in which people engage in their work and life sphere is the remaining part of their

total life (shown in Figure 2 in 4-3.).

2. Current situation of work-life balance in Japan

It is not easy to clarify all the reasons for a rise in interest in work-life balance matters in Japan. However, from a human resource management point of view, there seems to be two main reasons: matters relating to working hours and an increase in female workers.

2-1. Long working hours

As above mentioned, Japan was well-known for its long working hours. The annual total of hours actually worked, of which figures are for establishments with 30 employees or more, was 2,108 hours in 1980. However, due to the change in legal hours from 48 hours to 40 hours a week in 1987, this figure has been diminishing and, in 2004, stood at 1,840 hours a year (*Monthly Labour Survey*). As far as publicized total working hours statistics are concerned, it can be said that Japanese workers, compared with their British and American counterparts, by no means spend excessively long hours working. Meanwhile, we admit the fact that the proportion of workers who spend 49 or 50 hours or more per week on the job is the highest in Japan. Among the three countries, the figures are at 28.1 % for Japan, 20% for the USA and 15.5% for the UK (Messenger, 2004, p.42).

Some research, however, questions whether workers have actually benefited from the decrease in legal working hours in Japan. In a survey conducted by the famous watch maker, Seiko Co., when the question, “What sort of time would you like to decrease?” are asked, the top answer was “work”, with a proportion of 38.1% of respondents (Seiko Corporation, 2005). Among male respondents, the answer “work” has held the top position for five years. Another finding from

questionnaire surveys conducted by Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc. shows that many Japanese business people attach a high value to work places where time management is fair and holidays are easily taken (Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc., 2005). The top three answers to the question “Which measures or institutions do you place emphasis on?” were “easiness to take a long holidays” (59.5%), “fair hours actually worked” (44.2%) and “a well-developed holiday system” (38.5%), and this year’s top two answers again stood at the same position as in last year’s survey. These results show that many Japanese workers are not satisfied with the time management and holiday systems at their work places.

When asked directly, “Do you think your working hours have really decreased recently?”, few workers answer in the affirmative. One can easily conclude that the gradual decrease in working hours over the past several years is not generally perceived. So what makes Japanese workers desire to reduce their working hours, even when the publicized working hours statistics have been decreasing? One answer is that people actually work longer than publicized working hours. That means some workers are forced to do, or voluntarily do, unpaid overtime work. Ogura and Sakaguchi (2004) made a comparison between working hours surveyed by the *Monthly Labour Survey* and the *Labour Force Survey*. They describe the detailed differences between these two statistical data and recognize that “there are various differences between them and in the strict sense it is impossible to compare them.” They, however, continue that “it is still worth comparing them on the premise that there are certain constraints” (p.23). The big difference between them is that the *Monthly Labour Survey* covers business establishments and the *Labour Force Survey* covers households. One may easily conclude that the *Monthly Labour Survey* shows shorter working hours than that of the *Labour Force Survey* does because business enterprises report working hours as those recorded on their wage ledgers. The *Labour*

Force Survey, on the other hand, reports working hours as “real working hours”, regardless of whether employees receive overtime payment or not. Ogura and Sakaguchi (2004) find that the gap between the working hours of Monthly Labour Survey and those of the Labour Force Survey has actually been expanding. Additionally, the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2005) reports an average time of unpaid overtime: 35.4 hours a month for all workers, 38.1 hours a month for male workers, and 29.4 hours for female workers. For male workers, 38 hours a month means 456 hours a year when multiplied by 12.

Excessively long work hours have a negative impact on employees and lead to the deterioration of their work efficiency, morale and physical and psychological condition. The most lamentable result is death from overwork which, regrettably, has become known as *karoshi*. Even worse, some commit suicide due to excessive work. Takeda (2002) describes that “(t)he cause of *karoshi* can be attributed to the fundamental nature of the Japanese-style work week, which consists of twelve-hour days and work filled evenings. The Japanese work such long hours because in many organizations, working overtime has become a ritual of obedience and subservience” (p.265) (*Italics original*). The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (hereafter, the MHLW), set up a standard for recognition of work-related accident compensation to cover death by *karoshi*. In 2004, there were 816 claims and 294 recognized cases (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2005, a).

As is shown above, long working hours and its grievous result, *karoshi*, are emergent problems which need to be resolved in order to create desirable labour conditions for both employees and employers. As was the case in Britain (MacInnes, J., 2005), the demand for the reduction in working hours is counted as one of the driving forces behind the widespread interest in work-life balance

in Japan. However, it seems that it is not easy for Japanese workers to shorten their working hours because of current changes in management strategy and nature toward work. These points will be discussed later.

2-2. An increase of female workers and work-family balance

The second push behind the work-life balance movement in Japan has been the increase of female workers, and this has led to a greater concern over work-family balance matters. This source seems to be more influential in spurring the work-life balance movement along than the long working hours problem previously discussed. Because work-family matters can be viewed as an opportunity for employers to strategically utilize their human resources and, therefore, it is easier and more beneficial for employers to tackle work-family matters rather than grapple with long working hours concerns.

Currently, about 40% of employed workers are female, and this figure has been increasing over the last forty years. Although there still remains some dissatisfaction with unfair treatment of female workers, some progressive companies have shifted their human resource management strategy from a male-centred one to a diversity-oriented one – where human resource needs are fulfilled by workers who are competent, regardless of sex, age or nationality. Additionally, the socially fixed idea that “men work outside the house, women do housework” has been weakening in Japan. An attitude survey of Japanese also shows that the sentiment “female workers should continue to work after childbirth” was only 20% in 1973, but jumped to 49% by 2003. Conversely, the opinion “females should stay at home as homemakers” was 35% in 1973. In 2003, however, it became about one-third of the 1973 figure, or a mere 13% (NHK Housou Bunka Kenkyu-syo, 2004).

Meanwhile, the declining birth rate in Japan is also heightening the awareness

of work-family matters. After the so-called “1.57 Shock” in 1989, where the total fertility rate declined to 1.57, the government has initiated many countermeasures in an attempt to reverse the declining birth rate. The precarious social condition created by the low birth rate and aging population now occupies public attention and serves as the tailwind for the expansion of social interest in work-life balance – specifically work-family balance matters. In other words, it is now a social necessity to develop conditions under which the birth rate will recover. As society looks for solutions, working women have come under the spotlight, many of whom complain about the difficulty in having a child while keeping their career.

Since the 1980’s, new laws have been passed, as well as revisions to established laws, which support workers in the handling of both career and child rearing. These are the Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women, the Child and Family Care Leave Law and the Law for Measures to Support the Development of the Next Generation. The Law for Measures to Support the Development of the Next Generation, which was enacted on 1 April 2005, encourages child rearing not only by individuals but also by the whole of society. Companies which employ over 30 employees are asked to support their employees by providing measures to help them balance their work and private lives.

Under these circumstances, companies have introduced measures to support those employees who continue to work while rearing children. For example, Sharp Corporation (2005, p.66) “offers various benefits...*for working women*” (Italics, author) such as: “maternity leave and parental leave, as well as limited working hours to allow for childcare, which provide more days off and for a longer period of time than stated in laws”, “time-difference commuting for pregnant workers”, “leave to help children adjust to nurseries” and so on. Sony

Corporation makes several child care-related provisions and 96% of eligible employees (227 in total) took “leave of absence for child care” during fiscal 2004 (Sony Corporation 2005, p.26). As is seen in the above italicized quotation from Sharp Corporation (2005), these support measures mainly focus on female workers who have been, according to tradition, primarily involved in child rearing and who have had to abandon their career in exchange of child nursing. In that sense, it is a matter of course for Japanese companies, in order to break new ground for female workers, to afford the same opportunity as they do to their male employees. Yet, providing an opportunity for female employees to exhibit their ability has another meaning, apart from fair treatment regardless of sex – as a human resource management strategic measure. Japanese companies presently face severe competition from their rivals in both domestic and worldwide markets, and the need for competent employees to help the company survive in times of cutthroat competition is even greater (Michaels, et al., 2001). Therefore, it can be a strategic manoeuvre by companies to provide conditions which support female workers and, as a result, retain valuable and capable human resources.

Since 1999, the MHLW have publicly commended “family friendly companies” for their efforts in creating social environments where workers can easily handle both their careers and family life. The standards of the commendation include well arranged measures, flexible schedules and a supportive organizational culture. This commendation system encourages companies to build work places where employees can continue to work while they take care of family matters. These movements are worthy of evaluation, but, so far as the word “work-family” is used, the spheres are not expanded, and workers who do not have a spouse, children or family are not covered under the name of work-family balance. The word “work-family” has connotations of a desirable relationship between the

work sphere and the family related spheres of one's life and, therefore, the rest of the family-related spheres outside the work sphere in one's life automatically spills over to the "work-family" realm.

"The notion work-life balance encompasses the family-friendly perspective...., but is wider, seeking to help all employed people, irrespective of marital or parental status, to achieve a better fit between their professional and private lives" (White, et al, 2003, p.176). In this sense, the work-life balance movement in Japan has not yet evolved enough to the point where *all* employed people are covered. In order to create a work situation which leads to the vitalization of both employees and employers, what is needed is a bridge between the notions of work-family balance and work-life balance.

3. Current situation of Japanese white-collar workers

In order to discuss work-life balance matters in Japan, an overview of the current situation of Japanese white-collar workers is in order here. Two results of empirical studies on white-collar workers will be shown in this section.

3-1. White-collar activity research

Research to observe how white-collar workers use their time in their office was conducted. The aim of this research was to clarify the actual state of white-collar workers from the view point of how they spend their time at their work places (Morita, 2003). Ten male workers belonging to the personnel or general affairs departments at five different companies were selected as the subjects of the research. All of them worked in staff departments and not in line departments. The reasons for choosing the workers from different companies were as follows.

The first reason was due to the research method employed which, in this study, was the diary method (Carlson, 1951; Stewart, 1965). This way of research imposes a sort of burden upon the subject, as it requires them to fill in a form to record what they do, and when, during their working hours. This is a time consuming operation for the subjects and has the potential to become a hindrance to their work, as the case may be. As a result, there were few who willingly accepted the author's offer to collaborate in the research. The second reason was the lower probability of there being a difference in work content between subjects at different companies. The work content of white-collars working in staff departments, regardless of company, seems to be less diverse than that of those working at line departments.

After explaining the purpose of the research and how to fill in the form, the author asked the subjects to record their entries for at least five straight days and to send the form back by post. For fear that it might hinder their regular work, the form was specifically designed to be easy for the subjects to fill out (Figure 1). Actions were trisected into the communication via office equipment (shown in Figure 1 as TEL, FAX and E-mail), interpersonal communication action (interpersonal) and individual work which they conducted by themselves (individual work).

The results are as described below. The average values of the proportion of three actions are "TEL, FAX & E-mail" at 10.3%, "Interpersonal" at 32.6% and "Individual Work" at 54.7%. The data spread of "TEL, FAX & E-mail" is not so wide, but that of "Interpersonal" is extremely various. One subject who spent the largest proportion of all used about 70% of his time for "Interpersonal", but another subject spent only 10% of his working hours for the same activity. There is a tendency that the more years workers are employed, the higher the proportion of their "Interpersonal" actions. As far as subjects of this study are

Figure VII-1 Activity Record Form (a part)

Activity Record Form

day month year () No. ()

Name () Position ()

Time		Actions		With whom	
h	m	TEL, FAX & E-mail	Te (make), Te (receive), E-mail (inc. FAX)	In	Your office (boss, colleague, subordinate)
~		interpersonal	meeting, guest, report • communication	Company	person outside your office
h	m	Individual work	own work (routine, non routine), others	outside	()
note :					

Time		Actions		With whom	
h	m	TEL, FAX & E-mail	Te (make), Te (receive), E-mail (inc. FAX)	In	Your office (boss, colleague, subordinate)
~		interpersonal	meeting, guest, report • communication	Company	person outside your office
h	m	individual work	own work (routine, non routine), others	outside	()
note :					

⋮

concerned, the longer their period of employment, the higher their positions are. This reflects the same results as Mintzberg (1973) and Kotter (1982) in which time for interpersonal communication becomes longer after taking a managerial position.

One rather an unexpected result is that the proportion of “TEL, FAX & E-mail” is about 10%, as it is widely acknowledged that the development of Information Technology makes office workers spend more time using the tools of communication than before. One subject who spent the most time for “TEL, FAX & E-mail” used 19.3% of his total working hours a week. It is often said that many people are fed up with dealing with so many e-mails, though it is universally acknowledged that e-mail is a convenient tool for business. An interviewee who spent 9.5% of all his working hours for “TEL, FAX & E-mail” answered,

“I think the time spent on communication through office equipment is longer than I expected”

Or another respondent who spent 8.8% of his total working hours for “TEL, FAX & E-mail”, said,

“I think I have to handle more calls than I used while to I’m on duty.”

Considering the fact that these two interviewees’ time proportions spent on “TEL, FAX & E-mail” were less than average (10.3%, above mentioned), the subjects seem to consider about 10 % of time spent on “TEL, FAX & E-mail” as a rather high proportion.

The interesting finding is that “TEL, FAX & E-mail”, unscheduled “interpersonal” matters and other routine office tasks cut into the “individual work” realm, and this “cut in” led to the fragmentation of work (Mintzberg, 1973), especially of “individual work”. One interviewee said,

“I plan ahead about 80% of the next day’s work on the previous day. Things such as meetings, appointments with others and my own “individual work” are scheduled in my head. If something unexpected happens, like a sudden visit from an outside customer, an emergency meeting or some other contingency, “individual work” is postponed for a later time. As a result, I always deal with “individual work” at the end of my working time.”

A record of activity for one subject in a day (Appendix 1) visually shows that “TEL, FAX & E-mail” cut into “individual work” and that the subject finished his day’s work with “individual work”. This tendency was ascertained from almost all subjects’ records. “Individual work” is what white-collar workers want to do most and what they are asked to exhibit through their own ability. As a result, they try to finish “individual work” that they pushed back due to routine office tasks, even if their working hours extend longer than they expected. This

“push back of individual work”, largely due to fragmentation, is one of the main reasons for long working hours and work-life imbalance.

3-2. Discretionary labour system and workers' attitude under the system

Another study of workers employed under the discretionary labour system was conducted. The discretionary labour system was established in the Labor Standards Law in 1987 and has undergone several revisions. The focal point of the system is that, firstly, the work categories covered are those which, by their nature, require that the means or allocation of time for accomplishing duties be left to workers' discretion. Therefore, secondly, workers adopted into this system are those who have adequate ability to do their jobs, including time allocation, without detailed instruction from their employers. Consequently, workers under this system are legally allowed to work without employer's instruction and are given the freedom to decide the means or allocation of time for accomplishing their duties (National Federation of Labour Standards Associations, 2005). At the same time, overtime work is not applicable to such workers, as their working hours are not calculated based on how long they actually work, but on working hours deemed through labour-management agreement. The law allows two types of the discretionary labour systems. One is the speciality services model which applies to workers employed in 11 categories, many of whom work as engineers or researchers. The other is the project operations model, which applies to those who provide services for projects, planning, surveys and analysis.

The author has conducted research, questionnaire surveys and interviews on workers working under the discretionary labour system (Morita, 1998, 2004). An incipient interest in this matter was what reaction workers have when they are given the discretion to manage the allocation of their working time. The hypothesis was that workers would naturally shorten their working time in cases

where they could freely decide what time they start and finish work. The results, however, were quite contrary to expectations. Almost all workers made their working time longer than before working in this system, as is shown in many other similar studies.

The reasons for the extension of their working hours were found through worker interviews. Firstly, they were glad to be legally allowed to dedicate themselves to their work without worrying about the length of overtime work. This is “devotion to work”. A person working in a R&D department as an engineer answered,

“I’m happy to devote myself to my job till I’m fully satisfied, without being teased for doing overtime work for the sake of just earning money.”

Secondly, communication with their customers, colleagues or bosses prevented them from doing their jobs at their own working pace and, as a result, their working hours became longer than scheduled. This is the same phenomena as observed in the above mentioned white-collar activity research. Again, a sort of “fragmentation” is at the root of this extension of working hours. The third reason is a reluctance to finish their duties earlier than their colleagues who do not work under a discretionary labour system. The workers covered by such a system express some psychological difficulty in behaving differently from their colleagues. This is also said to be “peer pressure”, or the reverse effect of “groupism”. An interviewee belonging to the R&D division at a factory said,

“The assembly workers in the factory start to work at 8 AM. When they say that I’m really lucky to be allowed to come around 9 o’clock, I cannot help but coming at 8 o’clock.”

As just described, even workers who are legally allowed to finish their working hours do not willingly act to reduce them. The author agrees that shorter

working hours are not the only answer to a well balanced work-life relation nor are work-life balance matters discussed only from the view point of length of working hours. However, attention should be paid here to the fact that some workers cannot leave their work places due to subjective psychological causes and interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. How to cast away these psychological barriers is of the utmost necessity in order to fully utilize the discretionary work system and other flexible schedule schemes. That is why the author insists the importance of autonomy exerted in crossing the boundary between work and life realms. The concept of boundary autonomy will be discussed later as a possible solution to this problem.

4. Discussion

4-1. The development of autonomy and QWL

At the beginning of the discussion, we will focus on autonomy – that concept which is thought to be the key in the study of labour processes. Looking back at the history of human resource management, for employers, how to control their employees has been the biggest matter of concern. On the other hand, for employees, attention has been given to how to slip through the web of management control and how to resist it in order to work autonomously. Since the rise of behavioural science in the 1950's, academics have attached importance to autonomy, especially in the area of job design. In the UK, researchers at The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations conducted a series of studies on coal miners (Trist and Bamforth, 1951) and from them, proclaimed the concept of “organizational choice” and the existence of autonomous work groups (Trist et al., 1987). The kernel of the autonomous work group, as recognized by its name, is the autonomy workers have and, due to their autonomy, they can work flexibly

to adapt to environmental changes.

In the area of psychology, Hackman and Oldham (1975) used autonomy as one of its main factors in the Job Diagnostic Theory. They defined autonomy as “the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out” (p.79). Around the same time, Davis (1993) developed a job design theory from an industrial engineering standpoint. He mentions autonomy as “(b)y autonomous is meant that the content, structure and organization of jobs are such that individuals or groups performing jobs can plan, regulate and control their own worlds” (p.310). After that, the socio-technical system theory contributed the basic theory of job redesign and its influence has widely spread in Europe and the Americas (Kelly and Clegg, 1982; Pasmore, 1988; Van Eijnatten, 1993; Taylor and Felten, 1993). In Scandinavian countries, the socio-technical systems theory was a theoretical pillar for the movement of industrial democracy, and labour unions actively worked to build a democratic work place in which workers could do their jobs with a large degree of autonomy (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976). This movement was called the Humanization of Work or Quality of Working Life (hereafter abbreviated as QWL) and became spread worldwide, including Japan. In the movement, Walton (1975) proposed eight major conceptual points for the framework of QWL research. Here, particular attention should be paid to the seventh point of his eight conceptual categories. The seventh point is:

“The total life space – a person’s work should have a balanced role in his life. This role encompasses schedules, career demands, and travel requirements that take a limited portion of the person’s leisure and family time, as well as advancement and promotion that do not require repeated geographical moves” (pp. 93-97).

We can find that the root of the QWL philosophy covered a wide realm and already acknowledged the importance of a good relationship between work and the rest of work spheres. It should not be overlooked that an interest in work-life balance has not just suddenly come out in recent years, but an awareness of the work-life balance issue was known more than 30 years ago in the QWL movement. As Guest (2002) states, “work-life balance is central to debates about quality of working-life and its relation to quality of life” (p.276).

Through this worldwide resistance against employers’ control, workers tried to get autonomy back into their hands in order to attain a more human style of work life, and autonomous workers came to symbolize freedom from employer control. Friedman (1977), however, regards autonomy, precisely in the name of “responsible autonomy”, as one of the management techniques for allowing workers more discretion to elicit their commitment. He sets another management technique, that of “direct control”, against “responsible autonomy” and asserts the effectiveness to use the two different techniques in different situations. In the Friedman usage of “responsible autonomy”, workers’ autonomy is exerted only in the area that employers limit in their pursuit of company profit.

In the 1990’s, teamworking drew attention worldwide as the most effective way of organizational restructuring. Although teamworking descends from the socio-technical-theory-based autonomous work group (Procter and Muller, 2000; Berggren, 1993), autonomy in teamworking has undergone radical change from its previous connotation. In the development of teamworking, attention has been paid more to the flexibility which comes from workers’ autonomy than to autonomy itself, and workers are given autonomy by employers rather than by attaining autonomy in the way which was done during the QWL movement. As Procter and Muller (2000) points out, the recent driving force of teamworking is “an employer – or management – driven initiative” (p.8) rather than an

employees or union-driven initiative.

As is briefly reviewed, autonomy in which workers should have their own will has been transformed into something given by employers for management purposes. So what role autonomy has should be reconsidered when we attempt to tackle on work-life balance issues.

4-2. The relationship between work and life

Looking at the hyphen between “work” and “life” in the term work-life balance, we can read the following meanings contained in this oft-used punctuation mark. Firstly, as is seen, the hyphen takes a role to connect the work sphere and the rest of one’s total life. There is an interrelationship between the two spheres. It is true that people often take the notion that “work is work, and private life is private life”, but we see that the relationship between them is neither “a zero-sum game, in which a gain in one area means a loss in other” (Friedman et al., 2000, p.1) nor a separate relationship in which the occupational domain and the domestic domain are fundamentally different (Bailyn and Fletcher, 2002).

Secondly, as Hall and Richter (1988) assert, the hyphen shows the permeability and flexibility of the border between the two spheres, and this implies that what happens in one realm influences the behaviour in another realm and vice versa, like that proclaimed in compensation and spillover theories (Staines, 1980). The dashed line in Figure 2 indicates this point. The hyphen also shows that the linkage between the two spheres is not tight but flexible to adapt to environmental changes. This means that people, depending on the situation, have the potential to deal with circumstances around them by changing the sphere which should be stressed. The notion behind this is “joint optimization”, in the socio-technical systems theory sense (Cummings and Srivastva, 1977) and

the effective matching of work and life spheres which leads to the most desirable total-life situation. Kirchmeyer (2000, p.81) describes this optimal condition by stating, “a balanced life is identified as achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains.” For example, when workers take child care leave, they place a higher value on their life sphere than on their work sphere, and the result is more well-balanced total life.

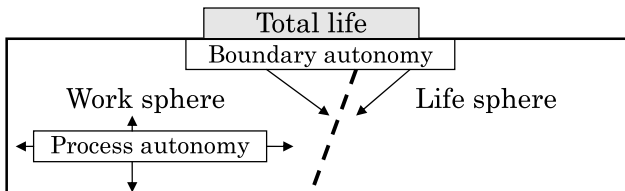
Lastly, the hyphen means that there is a boundary between the two spheres. As is mentioned above, the relationship between the work and life spheres is flexible and permeable and the border becomes blurred. However, for most people, with the exception of those like home-office workers, the two spheres are not blended into one identified unit. That’s why there still remains the difficulty of boundary control for employers (Perlow, 1998) and the necessity of the notion of boundary autonomy for employees.

4-3. Boundary autonomy and border crossing

As is reviewed in the former part of this section, autonomy in human resource management has been, up to the present, related to the degree of freedom employees have in doing their given work. In that sense, workers are autonomous in the process of work itself, and that autonomy does not go beyond the boundary between work and the rest of life. The situation is drawn in Figure 2. The left-hand side of the dashed line is the realm in which conventional autonomy is covered. However, the necessity to deal with matters concerning the boundary between work and life is acknowledged when work-life balance matters are discussed. For this reason, the author asserts that conventional autonomy is not suitable for dealing with work-life boundary matters, and that a different type of autonomy is necessary. This is also confirmed by the fact that conventional autonomy is often called “job autonomy”, meaning that autonomy is

closely related to the job concerns. However, work-life balance matters are not limited to only job-related matters. Therefore, we call conventional autonomy “process autonomy” and the new autonomy proclaimed here “boundary autonomy”. Boundary autonomy is the degree of freedom employees have to not only design but to cross the boundary between work and life by themselves. In addition, there is a specific organizational goal in any given work, where process autonomy is exerted, but the goal of creating a balanced life is not organizational-given but, rather, pursued individually. For this reason, boundary autonomy is more suitable to apply to work-life balance matters. The arrows to the dashed line come from both the work and life spheres in Figure 2, which denote that boundary autonomy can be enjoyed in both senses, determined by work and life sphere demands.

Figure VII-2 Work-life balance and two autonomies



Source: The author’s original

Then, what boundary do we cross in our daily life as “border crossers” (Clark, 2000), We cross the boundary on a daily base when we start and finish work, and in the long run when we take a holiday (phase H), including special leave for things such as child care. The daily base boundary crossing should be divided into two phases, one of which is regular-time work (phase D-1) and the other of which is overtime work (phase D-2). The reason for this division is as follows: the start and finish times in phase D-1 are fixed by the rules of employment – where

it is easier for employees to cross the boundary. In addition, the Labour Standards Law ordains that the flex time system and the discretionary labour system allow workers to decide their start and finish times, although the number of workers this applies to is not so large. Those in phase D-2, however, are not bound by regulations and, therefore, it is not easy for such workers to leave their offices when they finish their overtime work. So the difficulty for employees in boundary crossing occurs in phases D-2 and H.

Concerning phase H, for example, the average rate of acquisition of paid holidays in Japan decreased from 61.3% in 1980 to 48.1% in 2003 (MHLW, General Survey on Working Conditions) and it is still said that “there is social pressure which discourages employees from taking vacations” (Takeda, 2002, p.265). Although the pervasiveness of work-family movements is ascertained in section 2-2, the acquired rates of childcare leave are quite imbalanced between female and male workers. In 2002, 64.0% of female workers took childcare leave. In 2003, this increased to 70.6%. For male workers, 0.33% took childcare leave in 2002, increasing 0.56% in 2003 (Ministry of Labour, Health and Welfare, 2005, b). It is impossible to conclude that male workers take advantage of the support measures available to them for spending a well-balanced work-family life. The reasons that male workers do not take child care leave are fear of being passed over for promotion, inconveniencing colleagues as a result of their absence from work and a reluctant atmosphere in their work places (Sato and Takeishi, 2004). Regarding phase D-2, as is shown in section 3-2, even employees working under the discretionary labour system, who are legally allowed to decide their start and finish times by themselves, do not leave the office earlier because of peer pressure and/or their own devotion to work. It is needless to say that it is not easy for ordinary workers to cross the boundary in phase D-2. We cannot overlook the current change in management style – from seniority based to

performance based – as one reason behind this hesitation by workers to forgo their private time. Under the name of “Seika-syugi” (performance based or result based system), companies have introduced management systems in which employees are evaluated by the degree to which their goals have been accomplished. The ratio evaluated by seniority-related matters has diminished or no longer exists. As a result, this change has intensified labour, compelled employees to work harder, and has led to the long hours during which workers are expected to achieve results. However, at the same time, this shift in management systems implies that “time equals commitment work practice” (Bailyn and Fletcher, 2002) has gone by the wayside and that simply staying at the office is no longer evaluated. If this were the case, then one logical conclusion would be that employees do not worry about how long they stay at the office, as long as they perform well and can shorten their working hours to keep a proper work-life balance – at least in quantity.

Some people may actually welcome long working hours and intensive work to survive in a competitive environment and willingly accept an extremely work-centred life. If they and their family are happy with that life, no one should force them to change their work-life balance. That may be the best balance for them. However, as many data indicate, almost all workers want to shorten their working hours and devote more time to the rest of their work life spheres. In order to change the situation, employers should weaken their boundary control, which is “managers’ ability to affect how employees divide their time between their work and nonwork spheres of life.”(Perlow, 1998, p.329) Current changes at work places are employer-driven and, regrettably, workers’ initiative and power to resist employers’ control has become weaker in Japan. That is why it is necessary, first, for employers to weaken boundary control and to acknowledge that it is just as productive in the long run to give employees boundary autonomy

as it is to give them process autonomy ? especially in teamworking (Procter and Mueller, 2000; Van de Looij and Benders, 1995). Both yield profitable results for the company. Weakening boundary control implies not only providing flexible schedule measures but also creating a new organizational culture, by loosening “cultural control” (Perlow, 1998) and welcoming the pursuit of work-life balance. Additionally, informal means of organizational support are also important (Behson, 2005). In an interview conducted by the author, a work place where a discretionary labour system functioned well was where managers had experience in working under the same system in the previous days and really understood the mind of employees working under that system. Lastly and most importantly, it is desirable that workers should exert their boundary autonomy and cross boundaries without hesitation. Even if employers provide a working environment where boundary control is loose, it is the employees themselves who decide whether to cross the boundary or not. Without taking a first step on their own, it seems difficult for employees to change the current situation of work-life balance matters in Japan. “The nail that sticks out gets banged down” is no longer a fitting adage to the current Japanese work environment where seniority based management system has become irrelevant. This call for employees to exert their boundary autonomy is directed mainly to male workers, since it is they who have the most “disincentives” to improve work-family matters. Without a change in their work attitudes, the attainment of work-family balance and the expansion from work-family balance to work-life balance will not be realized in Japan. Although the question of how to overcome the “push back of individual work” remains, it is important for them to take the first step necessary to make change happen.

5. Conclusion

An epigrammatic closing sentence of Hyman et al. (2003, p.237) might be true: “In these circumstances, to talk of work-life balance as being achieved (or achievable) through forms of temporal flexibility suggests an element of detachment from the realities of contemporary work, even in ostensibly knowledge economy sectors.” It, however, is not difficult to envision a society where companies thrive upon the sweat of impoverished employees if our deleterious work customs are not changed to resolve this work-life imbalance. To avert such a fatal future, the shift to a work-life balanced society, even if it is arduous, is nonetheless a pressing issue in Japan as well as in other nations. In order to realize the change, Japanese workers are implored upon to exert boundary autonomy.

The Japanese are probably perceived as not being very good at exerting boundary autonomy since they “are lesser individualists, are more inclined to submerge their identity in some large group to which they belong, and more likely to be obsessed by a sense of duty” (Dore, 1973, p.297). That is why the author strongly asserts the necessity for Japanese workers to pursue boundary autonomy. It is, after all, the individual, not the organization, who decides where work is placed in their total life. Without exerting boundary autonomy, it will be difficult for employees to realize their full potential in their working lives and, without such activated employees, equally difficult for employers to create an activated organizational culture which achieves results. If we leave the current situation of work-life balance matters as it is, as time goes by, the situation can only become worse.

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VII Work-life balance and boundary autonomy: to activate employees and organizations

Appendix 1 Activity record (Mr. A, General Affairs Department)

Mon.3 June	Actions	with whom	TEL.FAX &E-mail (m)	Interpersonal (m)	Own work (m)
9:00~9:05	Individual work(non routine)				5
9:05~9:10	Tel.(receive)	external	5		
9:10~9:15	Tel.(receive)	external	5		
9:15~9:17	Individual work(routine)				2
9:17~9:20	Tel.(receive)	external	3		
9:20~9:22	Tel.(receive)	external	2		
9:22~9:25	report* communication	colleague		3	
9:25~9:28	Tel.(receive)	external	3		
9:28~9:30	report* communication	colleague		2	
9:30~9:37	Individual work(non routine)				7
9:37~10:42	guest	external		65	
10:42~10:48	Individual work(non routine)				6
10:48~10:50	Tel.(receive)	external	2		
10:50~10:56	Individual work(non routine)				6
10:57~11:00	Tel.(make)	external	3		
11:00~11:01	Tel.(receive)	boss	1		
11:01~11:12	others				11
11:12~11:14	others				2
11:14~11:14	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
11:14~11:17	E-mail		3		
11:17~11:17	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
11:18~11:20	Tel.(make)	external	2		
11:21~11:54	Individual work(non routine)				33
11:54~11:57	Tel.(receive)	external	3		
11:57~12:00	Individual work(non routine)				3
12:00~12:00	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
12:00~12:05	Individual work(non routine)				5
12:05~12:50	others				45
12:50~12:54	E-mail		4		
12:54~12:54	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
12:54~13:00	Individual work(non routine)				6
13:00~13:00	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
13:00~13:25	Individual work(non routine)				25
13:25~13:25	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
13:25~13:35	Individual work(non routine)				10
13:35~13:38	Tel.(receive)	external	3		
13:38~13:43	E-mail	external	5		
13:43~13:50	Individual work(non routine)				7
13:50~13:50	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
13:50~13:54	Report* communication	boss		4	
13:54~14:05	others				11
14:05~14:25	Individual work(non routine)				20
14:25~14:28	Tel.(receive)	external	3		
14:28~14:30	Individual work(non routine)				2
14:30~14:30	Tel.(receive)	external	0		
14:30~14:34	Individual work(non routine)				4
14:34~14:35	Tel.(make)	external	1		
14:35~15:37	Individual work(non routine)				62
15:37~16:10	others				33
16:10~16:15	others				5
16:15~16:47	Individual work(non routine)				32
16:48~16:49	Tel.(receive)	external	1		
16:50~16:52	Tel.(receive)	external	2		
16:55~17:05	others				10
17:05~17:15	E-mail	external	10		
17:15~17:45	Individual work(non routine)				30
	Total (minutes)		61	74	382
	working hours, 8h37m		11.8%	14.3%	73.9%

