

SECTION 6

Dissertation Synthesis

The following section presents a dissertation synthesis from two students who obtained a First Class Honours degree in Work and Human Resources.

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TITLE

Fathers and Work-life Conflict in the Maltese Banking Sector

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This qualitative research sought to identify the main factors which cause work-life conflict amongst fathers who hold a managerial role in the Maltese Banking Sector. It utilises the gender perspective, together with the notion of the 'ideal worker', to look at the challenges these fathers face, as well as the cultural forces dominating their working environment. These forces tend to increase conflicts and impedes any improvement in this area. Thus, this study builds on Acker's Theory of Gendered Organization and the concept of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of this study, eight semi-structured interviews were carried out. The participants were fathers in a managerial role, working in seven different banks, all in the local banking sector. All participants had at least one child under eighteen years of age and living under the same roof. These participants were chosen on purpose; managerial roles come with higher and almost 'limitless' demands, which will make it more difficult to allocate time for family and oneself, thus increasing the possibility of conflicts. Moreover, the fact the participants worked in different banks, will give us a better view of

the cultures, ideas and practices adopted in this sector. A thematic approach was used to extract the information obtained during the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

KEY FINDINGS

From the interviews conducted, several subthemes with regards to causes of work-life conflict emerged. These were then grouped into four major themes:

- Work and Family Responsibilities
- Cultural factors
- Psychological factors and
- Financial factors

The study highlighted that the above themes were the most likely to create work-life conflict for the studied fathers. Moreover, the findings shed light on another aspect which is important for this research. Both the work and life spheres are needed to support each other; they are mutually dependent.

Contrastingly, although they rely on each other, friction occurs between these spheres, due to the expectations both spheres impose on the studied fathers. Nearly all the experienced conflicts occurred from the work sphere to the life sphere. Thus, the spill over from the work sphere intrudes on the life sphere, and conflict ensues.

Interestingly, not one participant mentioned that conflict can derive from the life sphere to the work sphere. This can be attributed to several factors, for instance the support they have at home, which enables them to concentrate and dedicate most of their time to paid work, or else that they consider their work sphere as their main responsibility.

Although not explicitly expressed, the participants indicated that they are expected to prioritize work over life (Wilk, 2016). According to these interviews, managerial roles come with costs that would result in conflicts between spheres, and one must choose whether to progress in his profession, or else be more present in the life sphere, with negative consequences to his career. This is in line with Acker's Theory of Gendered Organisations (1990), where she states that the "ideal worker is the male worker, whose life centres on his full-time, life-long job" (p.149).

The responsibilities that these fathers have and the weight they put into these responsibilities are influenced by society, which in turn will influence organisations. Although more drive towards a greater contribution from fathers in the life sphere, especially family sphere, is gaining ground, the argument still

seems to be low on the studied organisations' and individuals' agenda. These interviews showed that the work sphere needs to be accommodated and the life sphere needs to adjust accordingly.

Furthermore, some of the participants stated that the banks they work for offer flexible work arrangements (FWAs) for all employees, however it is considered odd that a male applies for these flexible arrangements (Abendroth, 2017). Additionally, some banks seem to penalize such people who apply for managerial grades, since once in a managerial grade, you must forfeit these arrangements. The participants acknowledge that the work-life conflict they are experiencing is secondary to their role which limits them in how much they can intrinsically give to the life sphere, however they consider it as a norm, and accept it.

CONCLUSION

One of the main findings that this research uncovered is that, although fathers agree that they have other responsibilities apart from their work, they still tend to lean more towards the traditional idea; the work sphere falls more under their remit than the life sphere.

Also, culture plays an important role. Some of these managerial fathers, whose role permits them to start changing the culture prevailing at their workplace, still think that FWAs primarily target women. This is very worrying, because if these participants do not believe in the sharing of responsibilities, then how can there be an effort to start changing the existing culture?

Contrastingly, some of the participants complained that they were not given the support they needed to overcome such conflicts, and in some instances, they had to choose between their career progression (work sphere) or their life/family sphere. This shows the still prevailing 'macho' culture, where men are expected to dedicate their time and energy to work; all other issues are trivial.

Implications emerging from this research show a certain mentality when coming to work-life conflicts and gender roles. This mentality does not aid in surpassing the hurdles already in place because of gender stereotypes. Moreover, these managers can act as gatekeepers to such changes.

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TITLE

Early School Leavers: Employability and the Labour Market

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges that Early School Leavers (ESLs) face in their employment prospects and the challenges faced by employers, in the context of the current economic climate. The study focuses on the employers' perspective, as related research is very limited.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative research methods to inquire, document and interpret the meaning-making process (Patton, 2015). Data were captured through nine semi-structured interviews, conducted with HR professionals.

The Thematic Analysis approach was used to identify, analyse and report on the emerging themes from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

KEY FINDINGS

The study highlighted three key findings, these being: 1) Challenges faced by ESLs; 2) Economic and social factors; and 3) Challenges faced by employers.

Notwithstanding that the study was conducted by means of employer interviews, challenges faced by ESLs could still be identified; particularly the difficulties encountered in career advancement. This was evident when one analyses the roles that ESLs hold within companies. Very few managed to achieve managerial or senior positions and the few that did, only managed this after being in employment for a considerable number of years. With regards to training and development, whilst training was provided, this is predominantly on-the-job training, whilst personal development is very limited or even non-existent. ESLs already are at a disadvantage, albeit a self-induced one, of having low qualification attainment. With limited development prospects, it is very

difficult for them to gain the human capital needed to be relevant in an ever changing labour market (Taylor, 2013), where new trends and technologies are constantly being developed.

The current economic situation of full employment needs to be looked at from both sides of the spectrum. Firstly, this could be an advantage for ESLs as it is easier to find employment, where students could be easily enticed to leave school early due to the ease of finding employment, as also put forward by Gyönös, (2011). Secondly employers may regard full employment as a difficulty as this makes it much more challenging to attract talent, due to the increased competition and a plethora of choices for employees.

The economic situation is compounded by societal and educational factors. Employers referred to the perceived breakdown of the family, which could give rise to increased early school leaving and a lack of skills that were previously nurtured in the family. With regards to educational factors, it was identified that the school to work transition was often made harder by youths being unprepared for the taxing realities of employment (Brzinsky-Fay, 2006).

Finally, employers also faced particular challenges due to early school leaving. This ranged from the characteristics of the ESLs, which might not be aligned with the needs of the organisation, to difficulties in finding employees, staff retention and skills gaps. A particular concern was the difficulty in sourcing employees for basic roles from the Maltese labour market, which meant that employers had to resort to foreigners. This results in additional difficulties, due to the associated paperwork and permits that need to be provided for these workers. This has put an additional burden on employers, as it is also a lengthy procedure, taking anywhere from 10 weeks up to three months or longer, during which time, organisations have open vacancies which cannot be filled.

Staff retention is also a major issue, not only with regards to ESLs but also for the whole complement of employees. Poaching of employees is prevalent and job mobility is accepted as the new reality. This puts pressure on employers to give the best conditions possible, even though it is most often not possible to match the conditions of the new and emerging industries, such as the financial sector and gaming.

CONCLUSION

This study has brought to light potential challenges that affect both ESLs and employers, in the context of full employment. These challenges included less advantageous conditions of employment for ESLs, as well as reduced training and development opportunities, resulting in decreased prospects of advancement.

On the other hand, employers perceived the misalignment between ESLs' characteristics and the needs of the organisation as being one of the challenges they face. This is compounded by the increased expectations of ESLs and the difficulty in meeting organisational demands, in particular through skills gaps and culture fit, which impacts on the recruitment and retention of ESLs.

All the above is seen in context of the current Maltese economic climate, which brings with it other challenges, such as the lack of human resources.

In conclusion, the importance for being prepared for future challenges, through a talented workforce is critical, as otherwise an economy cannot grow and prosper (Borg & Camilleri, 2016). Thus, it is of paramount importance that the country not only focuses on reducing early school leaving, but also ensures that the ESLs who are already on the labour market have the necessary safeguards and are encouraged to re-engage in education, in order to improve their qualifications profile and bridge their skills gaps.

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