

A conceptual analysis of Quality of Work Life (QWL): Before and After Covid 19

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Abstract

QWL describes how individuals are with their jobs. It is a relatively recent term since in previous centuries the jobs available to individuals were often predetermined by the occupation of their parents. QWL implies doing a job one appreciates, doing it well, and being suitably rewarded for one's efforts. QWL in a job further implies enthusiasm and happiness within the work one is performing. While the QWL concept was first brought forward and gained considerable importance as from the 1960's, the parameters through which it is measured kept changing with changes in prevailing business and socio-economic conditions. (See Nanjundeswar swamy and Sandhya, 2016)

From the 1980's the world faced radical changes in business with the emergence of globalization, information technology, world business competitiveness, and scarcity of natural resources. While the business community was still grappling with these changes, they were made to face with yet an unprecedented circumstance of a pandemic. The new normal which had to be adopted lasted for nearly two years and also had an unprecedented impact on the labour force worldwide, forcing all organisations to employ "new ways of working".

Such drastic changes in the world of work changed the perception of businesses, employers and also workers who, by that time, had developed new perceptions about work, work conditions and thus eventually, QWL.

In the light of the above, we attempt to scrutinise extant literature on QWL from the year 2000 and try to showcase its evolution as a multi-dimensional dynamic construct. After thorough analysis of existing literature, we discuss the various parameters which influence QWL and argue whether there has been any change in the parameters influencing QWL before and after the Covid 19 pandemic.

Introduction

Wright and Mc Mahan (1992, p 208) define strategic Human Resource Management as "the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals." In line with the above, (Beloor et al., 2017) opine that The success of any organisation depends on the employee's strengths, skills, and commitment to the work (Beloor et al., 2017). However, the Covid 19 pandemic brought essential HR issues such as employee health and wellbeing, digitalization, agile HR including and perhaps most importantly, a refocus on the human (See for example Harney & Collings 2021).

As put forward by (Nanjundeswaraswamy, 2021) "An unsatisfied employee is the first enemy of the organisation, a satisfied employee is an asset to the organization, and they are committed to the work". (See also Nanjundeswaraswamy & Beloor 2022). It is now a known fact that The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the biggest crises in history, causing business environments to be "highly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (Biron et al., 2021) and letting the whole world still recovering from its impacts (Ozili & Arun, 2020). While not questioning the effects of HRM systems, practices and processes on the individual and the organisation as a whole, it is agreed that the pandemic forced organisations all over the world to reconsider and re adapt the way they managed their human resources (See Collings et al., 2021a), almost

overnight. Such crises have had an enduring impact on employees who may face enduring role conflict, job insecurity and cynicism (SeeKönig et al., 2020, Nguyen et al.,2022) among many other issues. In line with the crisis and accompanying VUCA situation, the concept of “future of work” emerged in the HR jargon (See Minbaeva 2021). One such component of the “future of work” has to do with Quality of Work Life” (QWL).

Against a backdrop as above and while also acknowledging the unique HRM challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created and continues to create, the aim of this conceptual paper is to focus on how the perception of QWL evolved during the last two decades. It explores the various components of QWL as put forward by various authors during the said time period and analyses the changes which were brought in describing the concept, before and after the pandemic.

Literature Review

Cummings and Worley (2005) believed that QWL is a reflection of the way of thinking about people, work and organisations that involves a concern for employees’ wellbeing and organisation. Employees who perceive their QWL in a positive manner and are satisfied with their work and organization show higher wellbeing because an individual’s QWL influences their health and psychological wellbeing. QWL also heavily influences the non-working life of the individual and is also a major predictor of psychological and physical wellbeing, and also of life satisfaction (Srivastava, 2008; Martel and Dupuis, 2006; Sirgy et al., 2001).

The term QWL was brought to limelight by Hoppock (1935) after having reviewed 32 studies on (job satisfaction) conducted prior to 1933. He observed that QWL was a combination of psychological, physiological, and environmental circumstances that prompted a person to say, "I am satisfied with my job". However, Hoppock also observed that employees can be satisfied with certain aspects of their jobs, while being dissatisfied with others. It is assumed that employees are able to balance the specific satisfactions against the specific dissatisfactions and arrive at a composite satisfaction with the job as a whole (Hoppock, 1935).

After the 1950s and 1960s though, the development of different philosophies and ideas pertaining to QWL were suggested. For example, Konrad and Mengel (2000) linked the concept to the relationship between employees and total organisational work environments.

However, as advocated by Martel and Dupuis (2006), a decline in interest in QWL was observed in the 1970’s which could most probably be explained by the oil crisis which the world was made to face. This trend continued during the 90’s and, among others, increased market competition due to globalization, emergence of new economies and an increase in communication technologies have been put forward to explain the cause for yet another decline in the interest for QWL. It is argued that, during this era, extant research rather focused on new emerging issues such as stress and mental health at work. However, in the year 2000’s, where financial rewards had lost power in a more knowledge-based economy, there was yet another surge in interest for the study of QWL, attributed to the “struggle to retain the best employees” (See Sojka 2014: 283).

A number of studies (See for example, Seelan (2008), Hosseini & Jorjakti 2010, Stephen 2012, Nanjundeswaraswamy and Sandhya (2016), Ishak et al., (2018) were conducted to shed more light on the parameters and characteristics of QWL. But, while extant literature was still grappling on finding a universal definition for QWL, came the unprecedented Covid 19 outbreak forcing organisations to dive into and manage “unprecedented territory as they alter their workforce in technical, physical and socio-psychological ways not seen before” (See Carnevale & Hattack 2022: 183). The pandemic thus undoubtedly brought new dimensions to the perception of QWL across organisations.

While trying to understand and analyse QWL, the seminal work of Martel and Dupuis (2006) cannot be ignored. We thus take up from the work of Martel and Dupuis and try to analyse the evolution of QWL between 2000 till date. We scanned available literature pertaining to QWL to draw salient conclusions about the changes in QWL parameters, meaning and components. In the light of these extant literature and empirical studies, we portray the different components of QWL from 2000 onwards and critically analyse whether there have been any major changes in the perception of its components and parameters after the unprecedented pandemic.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, some 120 research studies (to which the authors have access to) have been initially analysed dating back since 1935 to present date from different journals, magazines, abstracts, reports, books and newspapers available from websites such as Google Scholar, Emerald, Research Gate, ProQuest and Science Direct. A preliminary literature search was conducted using key words such as Quality of Work Life, Quality of Working Life and Job Satisfaction. Upon analysis of the comprehensive work of Martel & Dupuis (2006) who analysed the different spheres of the concept of QWL from 1948 till 2003, including the components thereof, the authors found worthy of partially extending the existing work of Martel & Dupuis (2006) in the first instance. Thus, after analysing the evolution of the various components of QWL for the last two decades, starting from 2000, the authors then contextualise QWL in the COVID 19 context.

AUTHOR	COMPONENTS OF THE DEFINITION OF QWL
Konrad & Mengel, 2000	Quality of the relationship between employees and total work environments of an organisation
Sission and Storey 2000	1. Quality of the relationship between staff 2. Total work environment 3. Concern about the impact of work on the individual as well as on organizational effectiveness, and 4. The idea of participation in solving organizational problems and decision making.
Sirgy et al.; 2001	Need satisfaction based on 1. job requirements 2. Work environment 3. Supervisory behavior 4. Ancillary programmes.
Lau, Wong, Chan, and Law (2001 as cited in Rethinam and Ismail 2008: 59	Favourable working environment that supports and promotes satisfaction by giving employees rewards, job security and career growth opportunities.
Ellis and Pompli (2002)	1. Poor working environments, 2. Resident aggression, 3. Workload, 4. Unable to deliver quality of care expected, 5. Balance of work and family, 6. Shift work, 7. No involvement in decision making, 8. Professional isolation, 9. Non-recognition of work, 10. unhealthy relationships with supervisor/peers, 11. Role conflict, 12. absence of opportunity to learn new skills.
Appelbaum et al. (2003)	1. The difference between the number of rewards workers receive and the amount they believe they should receive. 2. The fit between job requirements and the wants and expectations of employee. 3. More and more information about the workplace
Saraji and Dargahi (2006)	1. Fair Pay and Autonomy, 2. Job security, 3. Reward systems, 4. Training and career advancements, 5. Opportunities and participation in decision making, 6. Interesting and satisfying work, 7. Trust in senior management. 8. Recognition of efforts, 9. Health and safety standards at work, 10. Balance between the time spent at work and the time spent with family and friends, 11. Amount of work to be done, 12. Level of stress experienced at work and 13. Occupational health and safety at work
Martel and Dupuis (2006)	Corresponds to the condition of an individual in his or her dynamic pursuit of his or her hierarchically organized goals within work domains where the reduction of the gap separating the individual from these goals is reflected by a positive impact on the individual's general quality of life, organizational performance, and consequently to the overall functioning of society.
Seelan (2008)	1 Health and well-being 2. Job security 3. Job satisfaction, 4. Competence development and 5. The balance between work non work life
(Mirkamali & Narenji, 2008)	A philosophy, a set of principles, which state that employees are the most meaningful resource in the organization, and they should be dealt with dignity and respect
(Rathi, 2009)	The favourableness or unfavourableness of a job environment for people.

Hosseini and Jorjatki (2010)	1.Fair and adequate pay and benefits rights, 2. Observance of safety and health factors,3. Opportunities to continue growth and security of staff, 4. Acceptance in work organization, 5. Work life and social dependence of society and individual life, 6. Governing the overall living space in the environment, 7. Integration of social improved human abilities.
Stephen, A. (2012).	1. Adequate and fair compensation 2. Fringe benefits and welfare measures 3. Job security 4. Physical work environment 5. Workload and job stress 6. Opportunity to use and develop human capacity 7. Opportunity for continued growth 8. Human relations and social aspect of work life 9. Participation in decision making 10. Reward and penalty system 11. Equity, justice and grievance handling 12. Work and total life space 13. Image of organization.
Zhao, X., Sun, T., Cao, Q., et al. (2013)	Emphasises the material and spiritual satisfaction of individuals in organisational work.
Nanjundeswaraswamy and Sandhya (2016)	1. Work environment, 2. Job satisfaction, 3. Opportunities for growth and advancement, 4. Adequate and fair compensation, 5. Emotional intelligence, 6. Organizational commitment, 7. Organizational culture, 8. Relationship and co operations, 9. Job security, 10.Occupational stress, 11. Leadership styles, 12. Nature of work, 13. Facilities, 14. Autonomy of work, 15. Employee Attitude, 16. Job Challenges/ Job responsibility, 17. Training and Development , 18. Adequacy of resource.
Ishak et al 2018	1. Job satisfaction, 2. Demographic factor, 3. Pay and benefits, 4. Supervision, 5. Organization commitment, 6. Growth and development, 7. Safety and healthy environment, 8. Social integration, 9. Attitude and perception, 10. Employee participation 11. Work life balance and relationship, 12. Rewards 13. Teamwork 14.Welfare and opportunities, 15. Autonomy 16. Delegation of authority, 17. Organization citizenship behaviourur, 18. Training and development, 19. Financial ratio, 20. Equal job opportunities
Vidal-Blanco, Oliverb, Galianab, Sansóc 2018	Work and Leave schedule Camaraderie Self-Care
Hyelin Kim (Lina) , Yinyoung Rhoub , Esra Topcuoglua , Yeong Gug Kim 2020	In particular, health and safety needs concern with having a sense of wellness and safety inside and outside of work through a safe working condition and health-benefits; economy needs are associated with providing appropriate compensation, job security, and appropriate compensation: family needs refer to the balance between work and family; social needs imply employees' desire to interact with others at work; esteem needs involve with being accepted and valued within the organization or on behalf of the organization; self-actualization needs is related to employees' realization of their potential through work; aesthetic needs represent developing creativity at work; and knowledge needs refer to employees' desire to learn to do a better job.
Maqsood 2021	Demographic factors Extra working hours
Hilda S et al 2022	1.Communication, 2. Problem solving, 3. Career development and growth, 4. Employee involvement, 5. Sense of pride in the institution, 6. Balanced compensation, 7. Work environment safety, 8. Sense of job security,9. Facilities obtained., 10. Organisational commitment, 11. Emotional supervisory support, 12. Flexible work arrangements, 13. Organisational culture 14. Employee motivation, 15. Organisational climate, 16.Organisational support, 17 Job satisfaction, 18. Rewards and benefits, 19. Compensation
Martini, Fleury-Bahi, Proquez 2023	work communication, job representation and recognition, workstation and physic health, temporality, affects and activity, mutual aid and work organization, and work environment outside the activity

Table I QWL Components

The initial search was thus further refined, this time, using only Quality of Work Life as key word and limiting the time period from 2000 till 2023. Some 35 research papers were thus retrieved and analysed accordingly.

Findings & Discussions

While we acknowledge that few authors have attempted, based on the nature of their studies, to either enumerate distinctively the components of QWL, others have provided broad explanations of what QWL entails. Irrespective of the way that the components have been put forward, our analysis of the various components of QWL as shown in Table I indicates few salient aspects as far as the evolution of QWL components and parameters are concerned. Walton in 1973, used only 8 components to describe QWL, but by early 2000s, Saraji & Dargahi (2006) and Stephen (2012) had reached 13 components, almost double the double. Later in the decade, Nanjundeswaraswamy and Sandhya (2016) put forward 17 factors which determined QWL. And post Covid, Ishak 2018, Jati et al., (2022) had reached 19 components for QWL.

There is thus a clear indication that over the last two decades, the dimensions of QWL as shown by studies considered by the researchers kept on evolving. However, there is scant research analysing this evolution of QWL and most importantly, pre and post Covid 19 periods. This is what we therefore attempt to do. We first portray all the definitions and parameters governing QWL provided by different authors, which we came across through selected journals and compiled a table as below (See Table I). We then critically analyse and present salient changes which we have observed in few parameters and components of QWL pre covid and post covid:

Pay, Rewards and Benefits

The studies analysed showed that pay and rewards have been an important component in the perception of QWL for the later part of the period studied. It can be seen that from 2008 onwards, pay and rewards have been recurrently stated as being a predeterminant of QWL. (See Karl and Sutton, 1998) which became more prominent after 2010. While immediately after 2010, "fairness" (Hosseini and Jorjatki, 2010) and "adequacy of rewards/ pay, "benefits"" (Stephen 2012), on the other hand, became prominent thereafter. This might be explained by that fact that during the early 2000's, financial rewards had lost their power in a more knowledge-based economy, but at a later time, there was a "struggle to retain the best employees" (See Sojka 2014), which in turn explained the resurgence of pay, reward & benefits as a determinant of QWL.

However, looking at the year 2021 till 2022, rather than "fair", "adequate" reward and benefits, studies concluded with "appropriate compensation" (Kim et al., 2020) or balanced compensation" (Jati et al., 2022) as a predeterminant of QWL.

It is known now that the pandemic has significantly shaken the socio-economic balances of most countries, triggering financial shocks and strains across the globe (Kuckertz et al., 2020). Pay and benefits are considered to be hygiene factors as per the Maslow's Theory of Needs and as per Bongaerts et al., 2021 and Brammer et al., 2020, while hygiene factors were being provided by most companies before the pandemic, after the global and local lockdowns and restrictions, the situation was no longer the same. Thus, after the pandemic, if employees perceived that their total earnings were balanced with the work that they were doing, and/or found their total earnings to be appropriate with what they were entailed to do at work, it thus contributed to their QWL. This might be explained by the fact that post pandemic, many employees were deprived of their benefits which they were entitled to without forgetting that even few pay structures were readjusted after the pandemic. So, post pandemic, it seems that compensation (that is total earnings) was more valued as a component of QWL as compared to the traditional pay, rewards, and benefits.

Work Environment

Covid 19 brought new dimensions to work environments, whereby it can be very safely argued that ways of work were reinvented almost overnight. The onset of the pandemic practically replaced the traditional face-to-face mode of work with virtual working (See for example Adisa et al., 2021, Pataki-Bittő

and Kapusy, 2021). Malecki, 2020 opined that the pandemic resulted in the largest remote workforce in order to prevent the spread of the virus thus protecting employees' health.

In line with the above, it can be seen that work environment was a recurrent determinant of QWL pre covid period, that is from 2000 till 2018. However, from 2020 onwards, work environment was not portrayed as being a determinant of QWL. Rather, it can be seen that "work environment safety "and physic work environment" were put forward as determinants of QWL.

This might be explained by the emergence of the new normal of "work from home" becoming much more frequent in most businesses. (Pataki-Bittő and Kapusy, 2021). The very fact that a considerable amount of people had started working from home and or online (See Georgia 2020, Malecki, 2020) in all spheres of businesses, the work environment as a predictor of QWL became quite insignificant. Rather, the safety associated with the work environment became of concern post Covid period (See Kim et al., 2020, Jati et al., 2022, Martini et al., 2023). In other words, employees were more concerned with the safety which their work environment provided rather than the typical work environment characteristics. (See for example Jaskyte 2016, Wong 2023)

Health & Safety

In the early 2000s, safety and health did not seem to be a recurrent component of QWL as compared to after 2018. From 2000 till 2018, only 4 studies mentioned safety & health as a component of QWL (See Saraji and Dargahi 2006, Mirkamali & Narenji 2008, Nanjundeswaraswamy and Sandhya 2016, Ishak et al., 2018). However, safety aspects at work became a recurrent component of QWL after 2018, where studies specifically and clearly mention "health and safety needs concern" (Kim et al., 2020), "Work environment safety" (Jati et al., 2022) and "workstation and physical health" (Martini et. al., 2023) as major components of QWL.

On 11 March 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 a pandemic. There were approximately 118,000 infections in over 110 countries and by the end of October 2021, there were more than 249 million cumulative cases and 5.04 million deaths across the globe (WHO, 2021a). It is a known fact that workplaces did contribute to the spread of the coronavirus, that's why lockdowns were imposed (See The Health Protection Regulations, 2020). Such workplaces were not restricted only to health care institutions, but rather to all places of work where people interacted with each other.

Under such circumstances, employees realised the extent to which their workplaces made them exposed to health and safety issues. More so, while the virus seems to be largely under control, it cannot be said to have been eradicated from our planet, thus causing concern among employees. This scenario can very possibly explain the recurrent inclusion of workplace safety & health as a determinant of QWL after the pandemic.

Working Hours

Working hours and other allied factors such as work life balance and leave schedules, shift hours among others are also considered to form part of the components of QWL (See for example Ellis and Pompli 2002, Saraji and Dargahi 2006, Hosseini and Jorjatki 2010). Work-life balance refers to the extent to which an individual is equally engaged and satisfied with his or her work role and family role. (See Greenhaus et al., 2003, p. 513) and is thus deeply affected by working hours.

The COVID-19 pandemic has blurred the work and non-work domains as never before, forcing many employees to mandatorily transition to work from home. (See for example Corbera et al., 2020). More so, the uncertainty created by the pandemic caused organisations to opt for flexible employment arrangements, such as sub contracted work, temporary work, freelancers, among others (See Spurk and Straub, 2020)

While aspects pertaining to working hours, shifts and schedules were scantily mentioned as a component of QWL from 2000 till 2018, these parameters became recurrent as from 2020 (See Kim et al., 2020, Maqsood 2021, Jati et al., 2022). Covid 19 made many employees realise and consider their priorities about what they value (Amankwah 2023). Put in the words of Forbes et al., (2020), the experience of working from home has influenced preferences of employees as far as flexible work schedules and hours of work are concerned. Thus, studies, as mentioned above, show that the importance of being together with the family accentuated after the Covid 19 period. This concept of spending more time with the family is further

explored by Greenhaus et al., 2003, whereby he is supported by Kreiner et al., 2009 who call for families and individuals to recognise the importance of balancing work demands and family needs. In this respect, it can be quite safely seen why working hours become a recurrent component of QWL after the pandemic.

Conclusion

Our findings clearly indicate an evolution in a few components of QWL from its initial conceptualisation from both Walton 1973 and Martel and Dupuis 2006. As already argued, the Covid 19 pandemic changed business circumstances almost overnight. However, we also notice that although the pandemic did not bring about any totally new parameters or components of QWL, few parameters or components of QWL, as thoroughly discussed in the previous section, were intensified during the post covid era. Some salient components were also seen to be more recurrent post Covid as compared to what they were pre covid era.

Limitations And Direction For Future Research

As with any other study, our study also has a few limitations which we would wish to put forward. Firstly, we analysed research papers which we had access to. There might be other papers pertaining to QWL which were not available to us. Secondly, we did not seclude our study based on some specific sector, for example, pertaining to health care organisations, tourism sectors etc. We rather analysed the papers available to us based on the year they were published and having QWL as a major component or key word. Nevertheless, we believe that the major and relevant seminal studies have been portrayed in our study, thus allowing our findings to be generalised.

In the light of the above, future research can thus be based on specific sectors to show the perception of QWL in each sector, since it is known that although the pandemic affected all business types, few sectors of the global economy were more affected than others.

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