

Work-Life Balance?: Insights from Non-Standard Work

ANNE DE BRUIN* & ANN DUPUIS*

Abstract

The significance and growth of non-standard working arrangements is a phenomenon characterising the changing structure of labour markets in most advanced western countries in the last two decades. More recently, the so called 'work-life balance' (WLB) discourse has become prominent in some circles and is currently receiving heightened attention in New Zealand. This paper draws heavily on material from the second phase of the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme which investigated aspects of non-standard work (NSW) for two groups of non-standard workers in New Zealand (the relatively privileged, skilled and qualified workers whose work has a knowledge or technology focus and those workers in jobs in the lowest tiers of the occupational hierarchy), to discuss how meaningful WLB considerations are for non standard workers. We examine the relevance of the notion of WLB to these two quite distinct groups of workers. We also use this paper as a springboard to draw attention to the unsatisfactory nature of the 'balance' metaphor in what has now become the buzz phrase – 'work-life balance'. The need for a more appropriate conceptualisation of the work-personal life interface is highlighted.

Introduction

Not so long ago the organisation and regulation of paid employment in most advanced western countries seemed a relatively simple matter. Generally, paid employment was performed at the employer's workplace. A direct relationship existed between employer and employee. The proportion of male to female workers was relatively high and the wages and salaries of male workers (the 'family wage') were generally sufficient to support a wife and family. Employees usually worked set hours (the forty hour week). Moreover, the expectation for most (male) workers was a job for life. Such employment, premised on the public/private split, strongly gendered roles and the traditional nuclear family, was the basis for determining the rules and legislation regulating terms of employment and

* Anne de Bruin is Professor of Economics, College of Business, Massey University, Auckland.

** Ann Dupuis is Senior Lecturer in Sociology, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University, Auckland.

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industrial relations. Working arrangements like these are often described as 'standard work' (Felstead and Jewson, 1999).

The extent to which standard work is the norm in contemporary western labour markets has changed considerably over the last two decades and continues to do so, with employees increasingly engaged in alternative forms of work, as standard jobs are being eroded and 'non-standard' arrangements become more common. A variety of concepts and models have been developed to explain the changing face of work in today's world, especially the increasing significance and extent of non-standard work (NSW) (Burgess and Watts, 1999; McCartin and Schellenberg, 1999; Mangan, 2000; VandenHeuvel and Wooden, 2000).

With major changes in the nature of work and work arrangements, including increased female labour force participation, changes in women's career expectations, the decline of the family wage, the disappearance of the job for life and changes in family formation, the relationship between individuals, families and paid work has come under considerable scrutiny. In particular, the notion of the 'work-life balance' (WLB) has developed both as an ideal that people should strive to attain and a critique of the model of standard work as an inhibiting factor in attaining this balance. Thus, increasingly, with a push for family friendly workplace policies and flexible workplace practices, WLB has been promoted as a means through which the model of standard work can, and should, be modified.

Currently in New Zealand, issues of WLB are in the limelight, especially with a government led consultation process in progress. A Work Life Balance Project led by the Department of Labour (DOL) set up in the latter half of 2003, runs until mid 2004, so that the Government can consider '...what more can be done to support good practices leading to work life balance' (DOL, 2003). There is also a new WLB website (www.worklife.govt.nz).

This article draws on the second phase of the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme (LMDRP), an interdisciplinary, multi-year Massey University research project (see <http://lmd.massey.ac.nz>). This second phase investigated aspects of NSW for two groups of non-standard workers in New Zealand - those whose work had a knowledge or technology focus and were relatively privileged, skilled and qualified and those workers in jobs in the lowest tiers of the occupational hierarchy. We use this empirical data to support our discussion on WLB considerations in relation to NSW. We state at the outset that the notion of the WLB is not without merit, especially for some standard workers. However, in light of the rising incidence of NSW, we demonstrate its limited applicability and discuss the conceptual and definitional inadequacies of the notion of the WLB. Finally, this article highlights the challenge of developing relevant conceptualisations to fit the complexity and diversity of the work-life nexus of the spectrum of workers in the twenty-first century.

The Landscape of Non-Standard Work

Problems in defining NSW have been well rehearsed (see for example, Mangan, 2000; Zeytinoglu and Muteshi, 2000). Similarly, categorising non-standard workers is difficult, given their diverse characteristics and the possibility of working simultaneously in both standard and non-standard arrangements (Carroll, 1999). Confusion also plagues efforts to enumerate non-standard workers (Barker and Christensen, 1998:11). By some estimates, about 25 percent of jobs are in non-traditional employment areas (Management, June 2000) and in a range of possible employment forms that defy traditional career assumptions (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Notwithstanding definitional difficulties a range of descriptors have been applied to NSW including 'non-traditional', 'atypical', 'flexible', 'alternative', 'market-mediated', 'vagrant', 'vulnerable', 'precarious', 'disposable', and 'contingent' (Kalleberg, 2000:2). Arthur and Rousseau (1996:373) go so far as to introduce the idea of a 'boundaryless career' which is one where there is *independence from*, rather than *dependence on* traditional working arrangements (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996:6).

Non-standard forms of work entail variations from standard employment in one or more of the following: hours of work; location of work; tenure of employment; and employee/employer relationships. While variations on hours of work could include shift or roster workers, the greatest change in the last few decades in this regard has been the growth in the number and proportion of part-time workers in the paid work force. Part-time work can be permanent or temporary. What is classified as part-time work can vary from country to country. For example, in Australia the maximum hours a part-time worker can work per week is 34 (Mangan, 2000), while in New Zealand it is 30 hours (Carroll, 1999). Temporary part-time arrangements include casual, fixed-term and on-call workers, whose work is irregular and generally paid by the hour.

A number of variations from standard work relationships have also arisen. Contracting has emerged as a rapidly growing area of non-standard employment, as has the use of intermediaries, such as temporary work agencies (Burgess et al., 2004) and contract companies. Increasingly common too is the phenomenon of portfolio working, or multiple job holdings. Faced with increasing part-time work, a growing number of people increase their working hours by patching together various part-time jobs (Felstead et al., 1999). Individuals can also be described as non-standard workers because of the location of their work. Increasingly teleworking is associated with NSW. It is increasingly common too, for people to be engaged in forms of NSW that would fit multiple criteria.

The Work-Life Balance

Growth in the various forms of NSW has increasingly resulted in changes in the way paid work is perceived and organised. However, both non-standard and standard work,

appear to share pressures brought about through a general movement towards work intensification, defined as 'the effort that employees put into their jobs during the time that they are working' Burchell (2002:72). Downsizing, restructuring and moves to achieve a more flexible labour market have resulted in what Lapido and Wilkinson (2002:36) call 'a compulsion to work'. This compulsion can have considerable personal consequences, not only in terms of time and stress, but also, as pointed out so effectively by Sennett (1998), although expressed differently, with regard to identity and subjectivity.

A major response to the issues and problems associated with work intensification has been the introduction of the notion of a WLB. Defined by the British Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2003) as about adjusting working patterns so people can find a rhythm to help them combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations and by Greenblatt (2002:179) as 'the absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands', the WLB is frequently proposed as a means through which stress and/or burnout can be addressed. It implies organisational change in employer/employee relationships, through encouraging employers to introduce a range of options to create greater flexibility of working arrangements. Fundamental here, are notions about the development of a responsive workplace through the implementation of family friendly policies. The literature on WLB is overwhelmingly positive, seeing strategies which promote WLB as 'having the potential to be a win-win for both individuals and organizations' (Barnett and Hall, 2001:192). It is claimed that for businesses and organisations WLB policies can ensure that the best available talent is attracted and retained, while employees also benefit in that they can meet family, work and community responsibilities.

Referred to by Greenblatt (2002:177) as a 'powerful, new national sentiment', the extent to which the idea of the WLB has been adopted can be seen in a number of ways. WLB campaigns are common, like those emanating from Britain's Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2003) and Northern Ireland's Department for Employment and Learning (<http://www2.bitc.org.uk>). Such campaigns aim to offer flexibility in the number of hours worked, the arrangement of hours and the place of work. Moreover, countless web sites offer advice and resources on WLB. For example, the web site http://editorial.careers.msn.com/worklife/work_life_balance, provides downloads under such headings as 'stress', 'working from home', 'working mothers' and 'taking a vacation'. Workplace training programmes on WLB proliferate. There are specialist consultants and coaches in WLB and software packages are available on how a WLB can be achieved (see for example, <http://www.llamagraphics.com>).

What is incontestable is that the WLB topic is multi-faceted and by no means simple one. Guest (2002:265) provides a good summary of the multiple factors which relate to WLB. These include: determinants grouped under organisational factors of work and home and individual factors; the nature of the balance; and the consequences and impact of WLB. Importantly, he emphasises the need to consider 'the appropriate locus of intervention

to improve work-life balance. Is this the responsibility of the individual, the family, the employer, the community or the state?' (Guest, 2002:267). As epitomised by a recent editorial in *Unlimited* entitled 'Wilson, butt out' (Macfie, 2004), it is by no means clear-cut as to whether it is the role of central government to intervene in what might be considered by some groups as an issue that belongs in the private domain.

The irony does not escape us that WLB policies could result in ensuing practices that, in some instances, strongly resemble some of the less desirable elements of NSW, such as a reduction in work hours, or work outside the standard work day hours. Moreover, it seems to us that sound arguments could be made that the WLB is another normalising discourse in the Foucauldian sense, given credibility because of its institutional basis in health and management. But the point of this article is not to rehearse the academic literature in this area, or debate issues such as the psychological, economic and social benefits attributed to the WLB. Instead, we seek to contribute to the discussion and critique of the concept through insights from NSW. In the following two sections we examine two distinct categories of non-standard workers, drawing mainly on data from the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme (LMDRP).

Skilled, 'New Economy', Non-Standard Workers

The LMDRP material used in this section draws on interview data from 57 non-standard workers whose work involved either a knowledge or technology component. These participants were selected through non-probability sampling and restricted to people living in the Auckland and Hawkes Bay areas. Following Arthur et al.'s (1999) study, the occupations of those interviewed were organised into clusters: administrators and managers (4); professionals (17); technicians and associated professionals (30); clerks and administration personnel (2); and sales and service personnel (4). The types of non-standard working arrangements comprised three broad categories: contractors, employers and employees. Within the contractor category there were five dependent contractors, 34 independent (own account) and 11 independent (with partners) contractors. Five participants were employers. Of the employees 14 were direct and two were temporary agency employees. Since some research participants engaged in more than one form of employment types of non-standard working arrangements exceeds the number of participants in the sample (Firkin et al. 2003: 26-33).

Issues explored in the interviews included planning, education and training, autonomy, surveillance, work intensification, job security, the roles of networks, the use of technology, compliance and the regulatory environment, the work-life nexus and the advantages and disadvantages of NSW. The literature indicates that work itself and lack of flexibility have been the major impetus for the encouragement and promotion of the WLB. Our interview findings however, showed that on average these workers were characterised by considerable control, autonomy and flexibility in their work arrangements (Spoonley et al., 2002). We therefore draw here on our findings in order to look critically at the

assumed disadvantages of work intensity.

Many participants in our sample felt that NSW was more intense than standard arrangements. This was experienced in a range of ways. Those with more than one job usually felt that they worked harder in each of these jobs and that the combined effect was far more than a single job. Even those with a single work role found that they worked more intensely. However, work intensity was not necessarily equated with work overload. It was not uncommon for participants to feel that greater work intensity had advantages:

Well you haven't got the distractions, I suppose. I mean I just sit down and get stuck into it, generally.

I work harder and am more focused.

I try and work faster and smarter all the time.

Consequently these non-standard workers perceived themselves as working more productively than when in previous standard arrangements. In addition, many said they provided better value for their clients.

We're a lot more productive, a lot more efficient.

If I put in ten hours a day here, that would have easily been a 14 to 16 hour day in the office.

Balancing a number of pieces of work at any one time as many contractors reported doing, could also increase the work intensity. Though agreeing that he worked more intensely, one man added that this had always been the nature of the industry he worked in and was not simply a feature of contract work. Another contractor saw ebbs and flows in the intensity of his work, something that he utilised to his advantage. Some people acknowledged that while many of the pressures on them to produce and work hard were self-induced, these were often seen as part and parcel of being a contractor. One man observed that the quantity and quality of work is vital for continued employment.

Pressure comes from within – when you're working for yourself, you realise you have to do it right.

Interestingly, since some people felt that their work was much more intense and their output far higher, this impacted on how they charged for their work. As a result, some felt that they needed to work far fewer hours to generate a comparable income as an employee. For one woman, the intensity in one of her jobs as a contract writer, and the manner she was paid, freed up time for other work or more pleasurable activities.

So really this job at the moment, I'm probably doing three or four hours a day and it probably should be full-time. But the thing is that I can get the work done in that time and then it allows me time for doing my other work. And you see one thing that's really important to me is I walk over the fields every day. I do a big hour and a half walk in the country, I don't do it every day but I do it sort of five days of the week. That's really important to me, so it's important that I have time to do those things.

In light of the acknowledged greater work intensity, we were interested in how work was organised and how it interacted with relationships, responsibilities and activities in the private sphere, since an external structure was absent or certainly weakened. Almost all participants reported at least some time flexibility and well over one third noted that they had complete flexibility. Even those workers with set hours commented that their situations were not necessarily inflexible. Flexibility did not however, imply a lack of routine or pattern, with many participants noting how they structured their routines and patterns to suit themselves. For example, personal preferences meant that people liked some of their day 'to themselves', liked working at unusual times, or fitted in with established household or family rhythms. The most common factor affecting the structuring of time was the variable demands of workflows. Uncertainty was a prominent feature of NSW, particularly, though not exclusively, for contractors. This meant that there was an unpredictable quality to how much work people would have at any time. Consequently, they often had quiet periods and very busy periods.

Our interviews also highlighted the fact that NSW forms, with their greater blurring and blending of home and work life, clearly upset the old public/private divide of work and home. When the vexed question of "what is work" is added to the mix, the boundaries become even less clearly demarcated, as illustrated by the comment below:

We always have this debate, what is work? If I was selling cars it's pretty obvious what is work, I turn up I go to the yard, I sell cars, I come home and I'm not working anymore. We're writing a book at the moment ... I'll go home, and if I read a [related] book ... is that work? Even if I sit down and start writing, and I really like writing, is that work? Even if there's a dollar attached to that, does that count as work? And if it's only ever work when it feels like work, then it's hardly ever work. We talked in the beginning about blurring of distinctions and the hardest one for me is actually working out what work is. It's particularly difficult when you do what we do because, let's say we work 50-60 hours a week and that varies all the time, we might only charge out a third or a half of that, so you can't even say what you charge out is work ... Then there's some other stuff that is legitimate work and there's other stuff around the periphery of that which directly influences and impacts upon our work that you would never charge.

The following quote further highlights the blurring of boundaries:

My work and my passions and my interests and hobbies are all spent doing the same things. Most of my friends are like activists, strategists and schemers so that's how we spend our spare time. ... When some friends who don't sort of understand my life say you've got to have a break from your work, it's like having a break from your life. I work every day, it might be even the books that I read, even the fiction that I read. I've always got my eyes scanning for ideas with everything, even conversations that you have it's like oh that's a good idea and you make a mental note, it's a never ending process really. I never know the boundaries. I won't be at my computer at 8.00am and at 5.00pm be in the kitchen.

Both these quotes highlight the irrelevance of the notion of WLB for some non-standard workers. The merging boundaries and the way work and life interpenetrate are not captured at all through the metaphor of the WLB. For these knowledge workers, work and life, and the various aspects that make up these elements, are strongly integrated, rather than separated out as the WLB metaphor implies. That many people in our sample worked from home, that work itself ebbed and flowed and that many of them were unable to treat work as if it were controlled by an on/off switch, makes us question the value of the WLB conceptualisation as a dominant metaphor for contemporary work.

Non-Standard Workers at the Margin

This section of the article draws chiefly on in-depth interviews with 30 men and women who participated in our LMDRP study and who might be described as being part of the growing secondary labour market, periphery workers or 'workers at the margin' (McLaren et al., 2004). The interviewees represented people working in a variety of non-standard ways in roles that were seen to be low-paid and working in alternative and/or contingent working relationships. Participants worked casually, on a fixed-term basis, few had permanent jobs but supplemented their incomes by engaging in one or more casual jobs and many had more than one job. Two participants chose the strategy of supplementing their income from standard work with casual or temporary employment. Five participants spoke openly about being 'paid under the table' and at least six received a partial social welfare benefit from Work and Income New Zealand. With the exception of one permanently employed shift-worker, our interviewees were in short-term, casual and temporary employment and as such substitutable and therefore less secure. They were from the so-called 'lower-end' of the non-standard continuum which Tucker (2002:4) suggests consists of temporary and fixed-term workers who are more likely to be in precarious employment than those at the 'higher end'.

Employers tend to offer more advantageous employment terms and conditions to 'core' employees to attract and retain them (O'Reilly and Bothfeld, 2002). Conversely, inferior

conditions are associated with less permanent or precarious employment and are offered to 'periphery' workers in the so-called secondary labour market. Many employers combine a highly-attached, well-trained, core workforce with jobs linked to opportunity and promotion (Deeks and Rasmussen, 2002) with a growing number of peripheral, low-attachment employees (Klare, 2002:17) who are vulnerable to cycles of employment, underemployment and unemployment.

The pervasiveness of NSW schedules of the "24/7" economy and the implications for American workers and their households have been recently delineated by Presser (2003). She argues that with two fifths of all employed Americans working outside traditional daytime hours and week-days – during evenings, nights, weekends and on rotating late-shifts, there are new complexities in family functioning. Importantly, she contends that the burden of these non-standard working arrangements weigh disproportionately on the working poor, since they have little choice and are forced to work these hours as a condition of their job (Presser, 2003). This contention received support in our findings.

Many aspects of the lives of those we interviewed were affected by the temporary or casual nature of their employment relationships. For instance, unpredictable working hours had a significant impact on the family life of one man in a manual labouring role. He had worked in this role for over a year and still had to work split shifts determined for him by his employer.

There's no [way of knowing] when you're going to go to work, when you're going to finish at work. If you do go to work, they might send you one hour ... like rainy days, the full-timers they don't want to stay back, so we have to stay back. Sometimes I have to ring back and tell someone to pick my daughter up, my daughter will stay at her nana's place for another hour, while I work.

This case is an example of a more general trend that we identified among people working casually, whether this was by choice or involuntarily. These lower-paid non-standard workers had to fit in with employers' requirements and permanent employees generally got the preferred shifts. A balanced family and social life is often unattainable for workers in these circumstances and those having to work shifts:

Oh God. My social life and my home life is ... like Christmas time and holiday time when all my friends have their time off, that's when I work the most and I need to work the most 'cause I need to save the money for the weeks when it's more quieter, when I have one shift a week or whatever, so it stuffs up my private life and it stuffs up my family life and things but they understand.

You come off work at 4.00 in the morning, you can't go ... social things, let's meet for lunch, I don't think so, I get up at 3.30pm. Going to lunch is like, hey let's have breakfast 3.00am. Cultural and religious observances are right down the

drain, you can't ... on the feast day of the deity of your choice, because you're either sleeping off the night before or you're at work on the day. ... The impact on domestic and personal relationships can be devastating.

It's had probably a bad influence on my social life in some ways. ... Recently when I've been single and ... like my new job at Avondale, I work Saturdays ... I work Friday, Saturday, Monday, and then at [place of work], I do Sunday, so it's ... that main block of work is exactly when everyone else is having their weekend. It's quite antisocial in that respect. Since I've been starting to date someone new, I've been ... I've found it quite hard to actually see them, ever.

Work-life balance policies are introduced essentially to enhance the autonomy of workers. However, most WBL initiatives introduced by organisations generally apply to the permanent 'core' group of employees and exclude peripheral workers because of the contingent nature of their contracts. Therefore, the question can be asked as to whether these policy initiatives actually increase the insecurity of those working in contingent ways. In their research into low-paying labour markets, Dean and Shah (2002:70) found that in organisations with 'family friendly' policies, employers acknowledged that this was more likely to benefit those higher trained with more specialist skills, rather than the less skilled lower paid workers. In fact, one employer in their survey emphasised the need to protect the company's 'intellectual capital' which, by implication, meant that those with fewer skills had less value. Dean and Shah (2002:77) claim that while their evidence is limited, there is the possibility that WBL initiatives may inadvertently fuel inequalities. Our interviews, however, suggest that evidence may not be so limited.

Other literature on temporary agency work (Rasmussen et al., 1996; Alach and Inkson, 2003, Burgess et al., 2004) also indicate that there is a lack of control over working arrangements and flexibility is limited at the lower paid end. For example, Burgess et al. (2004:5 of 10) note that:

... for some workers with skills in high demand they can exercise control over when they work and for whom they work. While the industry promotes an image of choice, new economy jobs and "entrepreneurial" careers, the bulk of jobs are low paid and semi-skilled ... who are placed in a cycle of insecure and short term employment, with very low and unpredictable earnings.

In a similar vein, La Valle et al. (2002:60) concluded that control over working arrangements depends largely on bargaining position. Workers at the margin have little or no bargaining power and hence the relevance of the WBL notion and its corollary of flexibility have low relevance for them. While not denying that NSW arrangements can have positive effects on people's quality of life even at the low end of the labour market, especially through temporal flexibility, collectively, the people we interviewed had a more negative view of the impact of their working arrangements (McLaren et al., 2004:63-65).

As Beaumont, the CTU (Combined Trade Union - New Zealand) Secretary, observed recently, any strategy addressing WLB issues had to include decent working conditions rather than free gym membership or coffee machines (Dearnaley, 2003). Beaumont also observed that many people were forced to work on-call which had an impact on their lives, as several of our interviewees attested to. She argued, rightly in our view, that any initiatives should be as much about low-paid workers having to hold down multiple jobs as executives under pressure to work unpaid hours.

Unsettling the 'Balance'

The WLB has become accepted as a normative model for a healthy worker in a healthy workplace. As such it echoes other currently prevalent discourses of 'balance' like the importance of 'balanced eating regimes', or the desire to produce 'healthy balanced children'. Put another way, we argue that the WLB has become another buzz word of our time and agree with Benn (2002) who notes not only the 'new age element' associated with it, but that '[b]eing against WLB would be a bit like being against summer or good sex'. Notwithstanding Benn's comment, in this section we briefly critique the model before focusing more explicitly on the balance metaphor itself.

With respect to the model we argue that even if something approximating the balance could be achieved, it could only be achieved by relatively few people. The types of organisations most able to manage flexible hours and family friendly workplace policies are those of sufficient size, that if workers are not present for one reason or another, others can pick up their tasks, for a limited time at least. In a labour market like New Zealand's where 86 percent of enterprises employ five or fewer people (Statistics New Zealand, 2002), the notion of balance appears to be problematic.

Given the extent and rapidity with which the notion of the WLB has captured the hearts and minds of people in all walks of life, we might be forgiven for thinking this is a new concern. If so, it is worth a reminder that the theme has a long history. While cast somewhat differently, Marx's alienated worker could be seen as suffering from an 'imbalance', although in a Marxist scenario the sharp dichotomy between work and life has little meaning. Yet even before the neo-liberal changes of the 1980s, when a job for life was still a taken for granted, concern was expressed over the imbalance resulting in work becoming oppressive. For example, Weil (1978:84) noted that '[e]verybody is busy repeating, in slightly different terms, that what we suffer from is a lack of balance, due to a purely material development of technical sciences'. While similar statements about lack of balance are common, from Weil's perspective the content of many family friendly workplace policies would do little to address the nature of the problem of work. She argues that what transforms work from an oppressive to a rewarding process are workers' interpretations of the tasks they are doing as worthwhile, as well as providing the opportunity through which workers can fulfil their obligations to others and to the wider society. The extent to which WLB programmes and legislation can facilitate these

conditions is one that requires further research.

While the notion of balance in the workplace is not new, nor are criticisms of the WLB metaphor and we are certainly not the first to comment on its limitations. For example, Thompson and Bunderson (2001:17-18) argue that the balance imagery suggests there is 'an appropriate distribution of hours that an individual should achieve among the domains of work, family, community, religion, recreation and so forth'. In a phenomenologically based argument that critiques the balance orientation on the grounds that it 'limits the work-nonwork relationship to a zero-sum allocation exercise', they assert the need to go beyond the balance metaphor. By way of alternative, they posit the metaphor of time as a container of meaning, arguing that while this metaphor recognises that time is finite and zero sum, it also 'allows us to address the nature of the activities that occupy our time, including the significance that they assume' (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001:18).

Agreeing with Thompson and Bunderson that it is important to go beyond the notion of time assumed in the WLB metaphor, we believe, however, that the alternative metaphor of 'time as a container of meaning', that they offer, has limitations. It fails to do what a metaphor should do which is to 'provide a powerful tool for us to express ourselves, and at the same time betray[s] deeper constructs in our thinking' and 'describe the world in a vivid, lively, yet familiar way, enabling us to see events from a special perspective' (Inkson, in press: 3/18). Our contention is that 'time as a container of meaning' falls short in terms of Inkson's criteria. Although potentially useful as a framework for academic research, the metaphor of 'time as a container of meaning' does not conjure up an image that would be sufficiently vibrant to become the basis for workplace legislation or regulation.

Concluding Comments

Internationally it has become fashionable in larger organisations and governmental circles to promote the idea of WLB as a panacea for achieving greater flexibility in the workplace. In New Zealand, WLB has only more recently moved onto the government's agenda. It is our contention in this article that the concept has generally been viewed too simplistically. Our empirical findings on non-standard workers support the conclusion that for many of these workers the idea of a WLB may be less than relevant.

Non-standard workers are a disparate group. The exposition that we presented on two contrasting groups of non-standard workers serves to highlight that the notion of WLB is not particularly meaningful for a varied spectrum of non-standard workers. Firstly, for the skilled 'new economy' workers in our research, where the boundaries between work and life were inevitably blurred, the notion of equilibrium that underpins the WLB concept was not pertinent. Secondly, for this group there was an inevitability of work intensity, often arising from the deadline-driven, project-based nature of their work and contracts. Ebbs and flows of work intensity characterized their mode of work. By contrast, the non-standard workers at the margins were at the mercy of the vicissitudes of a contemporary

labour market by the very nature of their precarious, contingent and part-time work. They were, in effect, a means through which employers could 'balance' the demands of a "24/7" economy and society. Ironically, this employer balance was achieved at the expense of WLB of these non-standard workers for whom the *option* of a WLB was virtually absent.

For both these sets of workers therefore, we are forced to question the usefulness of the notion of a WLB, with its assumed dichotomy between the two aspects of 'work' and 'life'. Crucially however, the ability to derive enhanced quality of life, or, for want of better terminology, an improved WLB, depends vitally on the degree of choice and autonomy that workers have in both their paid work and personal lives. Certainly for workers at the lower paid end of the NSW spectrum, corresponding with their very low labour market bargaining power, the extent of their autonomy and choice is highly limited in the paid work domain. For those NSW workers with higher order task discretion, as Spoonley et al. (2002:440) emphasise, '... amicable blending of work-leisure-home domains, however, depends not only on prevailing social structures but also on individual personalities and abilities to devise effective strategies of self-management which minimise their own work/non-work conflicts'.

In conclusion, we draw attention to the challenge of developing conceptualisations of the work-life interface that are sufficiently encompassing to cover the spectrum of workers in the 21st century. In previous LMDRP research the concept of the work-life mosaic was developed in an attempt to better capture the breadth and complexity of the personal, paid and unpaid work lives of non-standard workers and the interconnections among these elements (Firkin et al., 2002; Firkin, 2003). In arguing for the idea of a mosaic, there was recognition of the basic and hardly novel idea that people's lives are composed of more than paid employment. The concept is similar in some respects to Handy's notion of the portfolio in which he identified two broad categories of work – paid and free (or unpaid) work, with both these forms of work then further subdivided (Handy, 1990:184). Nonetheless, it was elected to employ the mosaic metaphor to emphasise the combining of pieces, many of which may be very different in size, shape, colour and composition, and to highlight that while the edges of some pieces are sharp and clear, others are less so. In a mosaic some of the joins can be close and neat and others more dispersed. The work-life interface can be similarly visualised as made up of different mosaic-like pieces. Together these portray the combining of different forms of work, each with various characteristics, as well as aspects of workers' personal lives. The distinctions between components can be very clear in some places and less distinct in others, thus demonstrating the lack of predictable patterns.

On reflection however, it was thought that the work-life mosaic was possibly too rigid. The image of a mosaic is of a finished piece that is cemented in place in the way a mosaic table top or mirror surround is crafted. The problem with this metaphor is its 'concreteness' which does not fully recognise both the dynamic context in which the mosaic is located and the evolving nature of an individual worker's networks and relationships.

Given these conceptual shortcomings and in order to emphasise the dynamic and interactive nature of work roles, both alone and together with non-work and other unpaid activities, ideas such as 'configuring lifestyles' and 'integrated lifestyles' were introduced to better capture dynamic process of interdependence and tension between work and home (Dupuis and de Bruin, 2004; Firkin, 2003). Nevertheless, while these alternative concepts offered a more appropriate depiction of the work-life nexus for workers who experience considerable control, autonomy and flexibility in their jobs, they fail to capture the experience of workers at the lower end of the work hierarchy, who have much less discretion and control over their working arrangements. There is a need therefore to re-think conceptualisations so as to better encapsulate the essence of the changes in contemporary society and the realities and work demands for the non-standard worker. Until such a conceptual framework is developed however, we must not lose sight of the urgency for more research and policy action on ways in which both spheres of life might be enhanced particularly for non-standard workers.

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