

Examining the Impact of Economic Downturn on Work-Life Balance across Selected Sectors of Industry in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Economic downturns have significantly disrupted work-life balance for employees in Zimbabwe, intensifying stress and making it increasingly difficult to manage personal and professional responsibilities. This study aimed to examine the impact of economic instability on work-life balance across selected industry sectors in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research design was employed, focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of employees. The research population for this study covered all employees from the selected sectors of industry but for purposes of feasibility, a purposive sample of 30 participants was drawn from six sectors: agriculture, food processing, retail (supermarkets), automotive, education and health, with five participants from each sector. Findings revealed that economic challenges led to longer working hours, reduced job security and limited organisational support, all of which contributed to poor work-life balance. Participants reported increased work-related stress and difficulty meeting family obligations. The study recommends that policymakers and employers implement flexible and supportive workplace policies to mitigate the impact of economic disruptions. Adaptable strategies are essential to sustain employee well-being and maintain industrial productivity during periods of economic hardship.

Keywords: Impact, economic downturn, work-life balance, sectors of industry

Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) has become an increasingly critical area of study globally, with research highlighting its implications for employee well-being, organisational performance and societal development. Numerous studies in Europe and other regions have emphasised the importance of achieving this balance and the risks associated with its absence, including stress, absenteeism, reduced productivity and increased turnover (Crooker, Smith & Tabak, 2002; Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003; Bello et al., 2024). In Spain, for example, Méndez and Serrani (2015) found that women faced significant challenges in balancing family and work, a trend echoed in Germany, France and Russia (Keflar, 2015; Howard, 2016; Edmunds & Price-Jones, 2017). However, most of these studies have centred on WLB in contexts of organisational culture or gender roles, often overlooking the broader economic environment as a critical factor.

Valuable insights were reflected by studies conducted in Ghana's security industry (Amegayibor, 2023) and among working mothers in urban Ghana (Abrefa and Busia, 2023). Literature, (Darko Asumadu et.al (2018) details work-life balance among bankers in Accra. Moreover, the relationship between work-life balance and productivity has been an area of interest, (Ghareeb,2019). Experiences of University administrators (Obimpeh, 2021) were also

explored. Gender related studies (Acheampong, 2013) on work life balance, note that most Ghanaian academics were unable to further their studies because of family work conflict. Generally, scholars studying work-life balance have predominately focused on the micro-economic and sociological levels of the concept, leading to less conceptualisation of the extenuating impact of the economic downturn.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the impact of macroeconomic conditions specifically economic downturns on work-life balance, focusing on Zimbabwe as a case study. Zimbabwe's economic landscape over the past two decades has been marked by hyperinflation, high unemployment, currency instability and informalisation of labour (Mnangagwa, 2009). These conditions have created a precarious working environment, where employees face job insecurity, inadequate compensation and long working hours, often resorting to informal or secondary employment to survive (Muzaeni. et. al., 2021). This study sought to assess the impact of the economic downturn on work life balance on selected sectors of the industry in Zimbabwe and to unveil this impact the study addressed the following questions.

- What are the major tenets of economic downturn?
- How does a depressed economy affect employees in the workplace?
- In what ways do specific dimensions of economic conditions influence work-life balance?
- How can responsible authorities (Government and employers) support work life balance in such dire circumstances?

Literature Review

This study rereviewed related literature relevant to the major concepts of the study, i.e. economic downturn and work-life balance. To identify gaps in existing literature research questions are addressed. An economic downturn refers to a period when the overall economic activity of a country or region declines (World bank, 2022). This phase is often marked by falling GDP, rising unemployment, reduced consumer spending and decreased business investment (ibid). During the economic melt-down, confidence in financial markets weakens, leading to lower profits and tighter credit conditions. Such periods can be triggered by various factors, including global crises, inflation, policy shifts or financial instability (OECD, 2022)

Though generalised claims about citizens' suffering are common in public discourse, academic evidence points to increased financial stress, reduced disposable income and declining mental health during economic recessions (Shweta & Gawande, 2024). A study by Chamunorwa and Samantha (2018) concentrated on work-life balance at a micro-economic level. Its results strongly point at issues that are crucial in work-life balance. However, the study totally overlooks the macro-economic environment which determines most of what takes place inside an organisation, hence this current study that seeks to address the gap. While these challenges are widely acknowledged, their direct implications for work-life balance remain underexplored. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, placing additional strain on households and reducing individuals' ability to maintain a healthy work-life equilibrium (Dolot, 2020).

An economic downturn has widespread implications that ripple through labour markets, financial systems and society at large. The aspects of an economic downturn as depicted below, directly affect the employee's work and personal life activities.

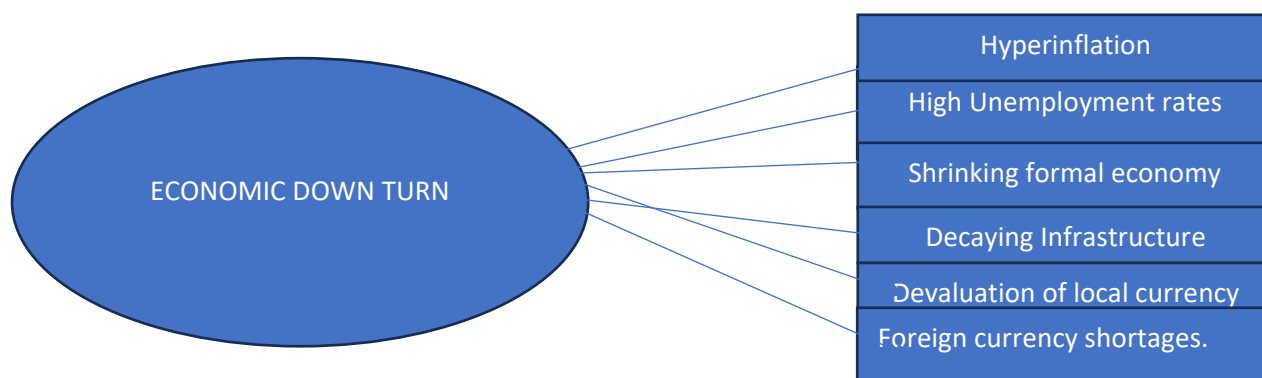


Fig 1: Aspects of Economic downturn
Researchers' own design

The effects of the depressed economy are countless. Employee morale decreases to the nadir due to the perceptions of being undervalued by their employers. Job insecurity is quite pronounced as employees are not sure of their future in the company. Virtanen et.al (2013) posits that job insecurity is associated with incidents of coronary heart disease. Nowadays the health of employees is a crucial economic factor of production. Another effect is that of increased workload which results in worker burnout. Ultimately the stress of the unsatisfied employees spills onto his/her life as well as onto his/her work and this creates work-life imbalances. A depressed economy adversely affects personal and family life. It increases conflict among family members and/or friends due to limited financial resources. The long hours at work directly erode personal life. Zimbabwe has faced severe hyperinflation, which has eroded employee savings and purchasing power. This has also contributed to employees spending more time at work to sustain their eroded income. Furthermore, the introduction of a new currency, the Zimbabwean Gold (ZiG) in April 2024 aimed to stabilise the economy but has struggled to gain public trust due to past experiences with currency failures. This greatly impacted on most employees' earnings as their basic salary was mainly Zig and foreign currency constituted allowances.

Dimensions of economic conditions and work life balance

To ensure relevance researchers had to start by carefully examining the dimensions of economic conditions and work-life balance. Research by (Muzaeni B et.al 2021) indicates that flexible working hours, job sharing, leave entitlement and technologically driven work systems should be utilised in such a way that the Work-life balance is not violated. However, this study goes beyond this observation by looking at the root-cause of organisational challenges. This is where the economic downturn comes to the centre stage. The relationship between economic conditions and Work-life balance cannot be over emphasised. In a study to investigate the existence of work-life balance policies in Zimbabwean organisations it was revealed that most Zimbabwean companies lacked work life work life balance polices, Mutasa and Zinyemba (2015). Mashavira et.al (2023) in their study to validate relationship between work-life balance (WLB), job engagement, and job satisfaction among employees in the retail sector, the study established a statistically significant relationship between WLB and job engagement further, the study revealed that WLB plays a major role in facilitating positive job satisfaction outcomes. They, however, noted a weak association between job satisfaction and dedication, which is a dimension of job engagement. The work-life balance must be fully understood before considering how employees manage it. Taken simply, work-life balance refers to the equilibrium between professional responsibilities and personal life, encompassing family obligations, entertainment and self-care. Mansoor and Fida, (2019) concur with the above

definition of WLB when they defined Work-life balance as the relationship that exists between personal space in life and time of work within human societies. This bears evidence that there is need to have strong policies that govern WLB with consideration for those economies that are not economically stable.

Disposable Income

A person's capacity to manage work-life balance is strongly impacted by their disposable income. Disposable income may decline during economic downturns because of job losses, salary deductions, or rising living expenses such as income taxes. Finding ways to assist people in difficult economic times requires an understanding of how disposable income impacts the work-life balance. Overall quality of life and work-life are closely related. Changes in disposable income can affect the ability to pursue personal interest and spend time with family. Examining the relationship between disposable income and work-life balance can help readers to understand how the economic downturn impacts people's contentment and wellbeing. Depending on shifts on their discretionary income, people may decide to take on more jobs or put in more hours at their current occupations. Studies on how disposable income affects work-life balance during recessions can emphasise how crucial personal saving and financial preparation are. Additionally, it can help companies understand what kind of resources and assistance workers might require in dealing with financial difficulties to preserve a positive work-life balance.

How Employees Manage Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) has garnered significant attention in academic research, particularly regarding how employees navigate the challenges posed by their work and personal lives. The literature identifies various strategies and practices that employees use to manage their work-life balance effectively, especially in challenging economic environments. Numerous studies (Sen & Hooja, 2015, Fisher, et.al. 2009 & Singh 2017) have examined flexible work arrangements as useful tactics for improving work-life balance, including telecommuting, flexible scheduling and shortened workweeks. These arrangements can improve time management, lessen the stress associated with commuting and foster a more flexible workplace (Hill et al., 2008). When given the freedom to choose their own work schedules, employees frequently report feeling more satisfied with their jobs and experiencing less stress. Achieving work-life balance requires efficient time management. Workers who use scheduling, delegation and prioritisation strategies, report feeling more in control of their personal and professional lives and experiencing less stress. To better manage their time between work and personal obligations, employees frequently utilize planners, digital calendars and to-do lists.

Studies by (Beehr & McGrath, 1992) have highlighted the importance of social support in both personal and professional spheres. An employee's capacity to manage work and personal obligations can be improved and stress levels reduced with the help of friends, family and co-workers. Social networks are frequently used by workers to exchange tasks, ask for guidance and receive emotional support.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in 6 sectors of industry in the city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, with particular attention to work-life balance. A qualitative research paradigm was used and for data collection FGDs and structured interviews, with open ended questions were employed. Such

an approach was found to be appropriate for addressing the research questions. The study population was all the registered commercial organisations in Bulawayo. The purposively selected sectors made up the sample size of 30 enterprises for the study. The sample size was deemed to be large enough to enable the study to reach saturation and interpretive analysis in a qualitative enquiry. The sample composition enabled the generalisation of results to the entire population of Zimbabwe. Data collected through interviews was coded and then analysed using content analysis technique. Interviews were held with Human Resources personnel, while focus group discussions were held with the rest of the employees. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data. Neuendorf (2019) says thematic analysis produces in-depth understanding of the research problem.

Sample composition n=30

Sector of the industry	Number of people selected
Agriculture	5
Food processing	5
Retail (supermarkets)	5
Automotive	5
Education	5
Health	5

Results and Discussion

The research questions were handled using qualitative data. The data from interviews and FGDs was categorised in specific themes and presented through guiding research questions. The interview with participants, revealed employees were aware of what the economic downturn means. When their opinions were sought on what the downturn meant to them, they had this to say:

Theme I: Identification of tenets of economic downturn.

S1. *“It is characterized by poverty as people can no longer afford to buy food, pay rentals and enjoy yourself”*

S2. *“Economic hardships increase crime. Employment forces people to rob and steal”*

S3 *The citizens of the country are found all over the world, in search of greener pastures” Interviews revealed that the economic downturn had negatively affected employees at the workplaces. When asked how they personally experienced the impact of the downturn, they had this to say; -*

Theme II: Effects of depressed economy on employees at the workplace.

S4. *“Employee-morale and commitment are drastically reduced”*

S5. *“Cases of misconduct can be on the rise as employees resort to side hustling for survival”*

S6. *“Employees are simply not satisfied. They are not eager to learn anything new and the workplace is no longer enjoyable.”*

S7. *“There is no point in getting new skills if we are not going to be paid more when we implement them”*

In the FGDs of middle management employees, it emerged that organisations should put up mitigation strategies for mutual understanding within units/departments. When asked how specific dimension of the economic downturn affected them, some discussants had this to say:

Theme III: Specific dimensions of economic conditions and their influence on work-life balance.

S8 *“Shortages of resources cause frustration among loyal employees”*

S9. *“Unstable currency makes attendance at the workplace unreliable. People begin to forge “doctor’s notes”*

S10. *“Family problems are on the increase whenever there is inadequate income.”*

S11. *“The quality of family life is eroded as each person seeks to survive.”*

Theme IV: Way forward: mitigation.

When a question was posed on measures that can be taken to minimize negative effects of the economic downturn of WLB this is what some respondents had to say:

S12. *“The solution is to leave the country. People have suffered for too long.”*

S13. *Work life equilibrium is a desirable goal. However, both politician and economists must collaborate to work towards a solution”*

S14. *“The economic downturn is a multi-faceted and problematic phenomena. No single authority can tackle it.”*

S15. *“The authorities should seriously consider recommendations made by economists, politicians and scholars in general”*

Effects of a depressed economy on employee performance.

It emerged that a depressed economy was directly responsible for the increased levels of anxiety among workers from the focus group discussions held. Frequent absence (for both genuine and fabricated reasons) was found to be prevalent in organisations. The fact that many companies were forced to downsize and retrench some of their workers, bred insurmountable uncertainty among employees. There was pronounced imbalance in the supposedly “balanced” work-life balance. No worker could remain committed to the execution of duty where the future was uncertain, and the wages were eroded by macro-economic conditions.

Key characteristics of economic instability

The research participants readily described the key characteristics of economic instability. These included price rises, high unemployment rates and low productivity by manufacturing companies. When questioned about the effects of a depressed economy, members of the focus group discussions uncovered two categories of effects, i.e. organisational and personal effects. Dave and Purohit (2016) posit that individual employees continue to experience challenges of work-life balance, despite noble work-life balance policies. Therefore, individual coping strategies are required, as pointed out by Zheng et.al (2016 and Kiburz et.al, 2017).

Individual Coping Strategies

The findings from FGDs revealed that a sizeable number of employees extended their work hours to compensate for any financial setbacks and to address workload demands; employees engaging side jobs indicated that they were seeking additional sources of income to cope with the economic challenges. Some employees were prioritizing work over personal time off, due to concerns about job security or financial stability. Employees working on weekends reveal a similar motivation to extended work hours to address economic uncertainties and workload demands. Overall, the findings indicated that the economic downturn is influencing employees' behaviour and work habits, prompting them to come up with some strategies that help them survive under the circumstances. These survival strategies lead to the disturbance of the WLB equilibrium.

Organisational Coping Strategies

The respondents revealed that the organisational level strategies implemented in response to the economic downturn had effect on work life balance. Layoffs led to increased workload and job security among the remaining staff, negatively affecting their work-life balance. Withdrawal of benefits showed a detrimental effect on the work-life balance as employees may feel less supported by the organisation. Imposing work overload on employees results in burnout, decreased productivity and strained work-life balance. The non-filling of vacant posts meant that the remaining employees took on additional responsibilities, leading to increased workload and potential work-life imbalance. The absence of pay rises during an economic downturn can lead to financial strain for employees, affecting their work-life balance. Employees may feel undervalued and demotivated, grossly reducing their overall job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. Organisational strategies aimed at cost-cutting and managing resources during an economic downturn may have unintended consequences on employee well-being, job satisfaction and work-life balance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study threw a lot of light on WLB in Zimbabwe. Family ties were seriously destabilized by work-life balance challenges. The economic hardships experienced by the Zimbabwean citizens made the Human Resource personnel work harder as they tried to grapple with the demands/expectations of employees. The fact of the matter unfolded by this study is that WLB cannot be achieved under harsh economic conditions. Having found the root cause(s) of work-life imbalance, the researchers suggest that the Government of Zimbabwe and the Private sector liaise with one another, in formulating effective economic policies. Otherwise, the workforce, across various sectors of industry, remains doomed. There is gross frustration at work and the same or even worse frustration beyond the work domain. In a nutshell, the researchers are of

the opinion that WLB is a multifaceted and complex area of study, which calls for adaptability and deeper discernment from key stakeholders. A longitudinal study which can have follow-up interactions with research respondents is strongly recommended.

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