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EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY PHARMACEUTICAL SALES PROFESSIONALS IN ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the issue of WLB achieved by the sales force of the pharmaceutical industry in Malaysia, which could impact employee wellness and organizational productivity. This study is qualitative and phenomenological in nature, investigating the case of nine pharmaceutical sales representatives in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study discussed in this paper is grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and identifies four themes from the interviews: contending autonomy and time boundaries, job demands and stress, workload and operational pressure, and social support and collaborative coping strategies. The findings from this research show that professionals enjoy role autonomy yet have blurred work-life boundaries, which is attributed to their growing demands. The lifestyle paradox of the modern world, which has been recognized in the international framework of WLB, appears to explain the findings of this study. Many of these issues have been blamed for the emotional and physical exhaustion, coupled with the absence of support from the manager as well as social expectation in a collectivistic country like Malaysia. On the other hand, support from work peers, the family, and understanding supervisors proved to be an effective way to reduce stress, while the absence of these support systems intensified the situation. This points to the necessity of integrated flexible work policies, the development of managerial training programs that equip leaders with skills to foster supportive work environments, and cross-national WLB initiatives to achieve SDG8 goals.

KEYWORDS: Work-life balance (WLB); Pharmaceutical sales representatives; Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model; Employee wellness; Social support; Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG8).

1 INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance (WLB) is a critical factor influencing employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organizational success. According to Scholarios (2004), WLB plays a crucial role in shaping employees' attitudes toward their organizations and personal well-being. WLB is also one of the critical factors that influences employee productivity (Rahman and Sing, 2024). Balancing a career with personal or family life can be challenging and has a significant impact on work and life satisfaction (Broers, 2005). These challenges are specifically relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which emphasizes "Decent Work and Economic Growth" promoting safe, fair, and supportive working conditions. Employees who attain better work-life balance tend to perform better and experience higher job satisfaction compared to those who do not (Sayers, 2007). In highly competitive industries such as pharmaceuticals, where sales representatives face heavy workloads, target pressure, long hours, and constant mobility, job stress is a persistent concern (Farid, 2015). Understanding how these stressors intersect with WLB is vital for improving employee well-being and organizational performance. The modern workplace, which is shaped by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and evolving societal expectations, has increasingly blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life. As early as 2006, Olson-Buchanan and Boswell discussed how these boundaries were becoming less distinct. Over a decade later, this issue remains relevant, with Gaskell (2020) describing blurred work-life boundaries as "the new norm." The constant presence of smartphones and other digital tools has made after-hours connectivity nearly unavoidable, making it difficult for employees to fully disconnect from work responsibilities even during their personal time.

Although work-life balance and flexibility policies have become more common around the world, research shows they often fall short of truly improving well-being and promoting equality (U.N. Women, 2022). Some studies point to positive outcomes, such as giving employees more control and a greater voice at work (Fox et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2008). However, others warn that these policies can worsen inequality, as access may vary across job types and using them can lead to uncertain career consequences (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Perrigino et al., 2018). Interestingly, it is often the availability of policies, not whether people use them, that has a stronger impact on outcomes like work-family

conflict (Allen et al., 2013). And when flexibility is used, informal arrangements like occasional time-off with a manager. These findings suggest that simply having WLB policies is not enough; without careful and fair implementation, approval may be more effective than formal policies (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). Their full benefits may never be realized (Daniels et al., 2021).

2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite growing awareness of the importance of work-life balance, there remains a lack of in-depth understanding of how employees in the pharmaceutical sector personally experience and navigate this issue. While Dousin et al. (2019), Omar (2016), and Yee (2015) have examined WLB in healthcare, their focus was not on sales professionals. Vasan (2018) highlights the demanding nature of pharmaceutical sales roles, while Hassan et al. (2010) and Allen et al. (2015) show that family-to-work conflict is especially pronounced in collectivist cultures like Malaysia. Norizan et al. (2022) and Saedin et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of support structures and managerial engagement, yet studies specific to this occupational group remain limited. Much of the existing literature emphasizes organizational outcomes or broad sectoral trends, with fewer studies delving into the lived experiences and subjective perspectives of employees, particularly in sales-oriented healthcare roles. Several scholars (e.g., Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Kelly et al., 2008; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Perrigino et al., 2018) have highlighted this imbalance, calling for more nuanced research that centers the employee voice in understanding the real-world impact of WLB on this group.

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of work-life balance among pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia, a group frequently exposed to demanding work environments characterized by long hours, extensive travel, and intense performance targets. Such conditions often blur the boundaries between work and personal life, potentially affecting employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life. By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals in this field, the research seeks to gain deeper insights into how they personally perceive and navigate work-life balance.

4 UNDERPINNING THEORY

To examine the WLB challenges faced by pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia, this

study adopts the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory developed by Bakker et al. (2007) as its foundational framework. Widely used in occupational health psychology, the JD-R model offers a structured approach to understanding how various job characteristics impact employee well-being. The model divides job characteristics into two core elements:

Job Demands are aspects of a job that require ongoing physical, emotional, or cognitive effort, often leading to strain. In pharmaceutical sales, these may include long hours, extensive travel, pressure to meet performance targets, and continuous interactions with healthcare professionals. Prolonged exposure to such demands can lead to fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and reduced ability to meet personal responsibilities. Alarming, long working hours have been identified as a major psychosocial occupational risk factor. A study by Yuan et al. (2022) notes that extended work hours significantly contribute to occupational stress, with WHO and ILO estimates attributing approximately 744,924 deaths globally to this issue (Pega et al., 2022), emphasizing its serious implications for health and well-being. Job Resources, on the other hand, are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational supports that help employees cope with job demands, achieve work goals, and promote personal development. In this context, resources such as supportive leadership, scheduling autonomy, digital tools that reduce travel, and flexible working arrangements can buffer the negative impact of high demands. When these resources are insufficient, the risk of work-life imbalance increases. Recent research using the JD-R model in demanding professions (Kohnen et al., 2024; Kovács et al., 2024) highlights that individual outcomes vary depending on personal resilience, coping mechanisms, and available support systems. This supports the need for context-specific and personalized strategies to address WLB issues.

Applying the JD-R model in this study helps to pinpoint how an imbalance between demands and resources contributes to WLB challenges among pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia. It also informs potential organizational interventions such as offering flexible schedules, enhancing managerial support, or leveraging digital solutions to help employees manage competing demands more effectively.

5 CHALLENGES MAINTAINING WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG PHARMACEUTICAL SALES PROFESSIONALS

5.1 High Workload

Nordin et al. (2022) studied healthcare workers in

Malaysia's northwest region during the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. Despite the easing of measures, these professionals continued to experience significant depression, anxiety, and stress, largely due to heavy workloads, fear of infection, and inadequate rest, highlighting ongoing mental health challenges in high-pressure roles. Similarly, Munusamy et al. (2024) reviewed the mental health of Malaysian educators, finding that work-family conflict, excessive workloads, and emotional strain were major contributors to poor mental health. Shahrudin et al. (2025) also found that primary care doctors in Malaysia faced significant stress during the pandemic, emphasizing the WLB challenges in the sector and the urgent need to address work-related stress in demanding roles. Studies have confirmed that excessive workload is one of the most significant predictors of burnout among workers in healthcare professions (Kurniawati et al., 2023).

Ferguson et al. (2011) emphasized that work-life balance is shaped not only by long hours but also by job complexity and both financial and non-financial expectations. When employees are expected to always be available or go beyond their limits, it often results in emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction.

Together, these studies underscore how high workloads and emotionally demanding job roles severely impact professionals' mental health, reinforcing the importance of addressing workload-related stressors to support better work-life balance across high-pressure sectors. Given the similarly demanding nature of pharmaceutical sales roles marked by tight targets, travel, and customer engagement, these findings are likely to be highly relevant to understanding WLB challenges in this sector as well. Supporting this, recent research in B2B sales shows that constant pressure to meet expectations and digital overload can take a serious toll on mental well-being (Kemp et al., 2025). However, it also highlights that with the right support, both from within the organization and on a personal level, these challenges can be eased, helping salespeople stay mentally healthy and perform better in their roles (Kemp et al., 2025).

5.2 Workplace Stress

High-demand pharmaceutical sales present a setting where workplace stress operates as a primary element to disrupt work-life balance. The stress from working environment and organization structures with personal aspects along with job-related demands generate work-related strain (Bae & Min,

2016; Blanc-Lapierre et al., 2017). Sales professionals in pharmaceuticals often deal with role overload, tight deadlines, and performance pressures which exacerbates their stress levels. The research shows that this type of stress influences employee motivation together with health and performance ability and work attendance frequency (Patwary & Rashid, 2016).

Workplace stress tends to occur when employees face demands beyond their ability to handle and when they encounter confusing roles combined with procedural obstacles and contradicting performance expectations (Chao et al., 2015; Eddy et al., 2016). External factors from outside work such as family issues coupled with financial strain, can forcefully increase stress levels. In the pharmaceutical sector, these stressors are intensified by factors such as territorial responsibilities, client expectations, and the need for constant professional upskilling. Kerdpitak and Jermsittiparsert (2020) empirically established that both stress and poor work-life balance are strong predictors of turnover intention in the Thai pharmaceutical sector. Their study reinforces the importance of implementing effective workplace support systems to mitigate stress and retain skilled talent

According to Foy et al. (2019), how employees perceive job demands, their level of control, workplace relationships, and organizational culture determines the degree of stress experienced. When unmanaged, this workplace stress can lead to burnout, absenteeism, and even turnover, which makes achieving a healthy life-work balance increasingly difficult. Carvalheiro et al. (1995) and Goh et al. (2015) also emphasized the long-term health and performance impacts of sustained workplace stress.

5.3 Lack of Social Support

Research consistently highlights that social support in the workplace mitigates occupational stress and its adverse effects. Employees who receive strong social support report lower stress levels, reduced absenteeism, and higher engagement (Ahmad et al., 1999; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Conversely, a lack of support exacerbates work-family conflict, stress, and job strain, ultimately diminishing productivity and job satisfaction, factors that directly undermine WLB.

Recognizing the pivotal role of social support, researchers have expanded traditional Quality of Work Life (QWL) frameworks to include it as a key dimension alongside job demands and control (Van Der Doef & Maes, 1999). These studies emphasize

that workplaces fostering supportive cultures not only enhance employee well-being but also actively promote work-life harmony. Given these findings, organizational interventions aimed at strengthening workplace relationships are not just beneficial but necessary to sustain employee well-being and productivity.

6 METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to uncover the personal meanings and subjective experiences of individuals (Van Manen, 2016). Through semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to delve into participants' personal stories and the meanings they attach to their experiences, including the challenges they face and the strategies they use to cope with their professional and personal lives. Phenomenology was chosen for this study to understand and describe the lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon, emphasizing how they perceived, interpreted, and made sense of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 75).

This methodological choice directly supported the study's aim to uncover meaningful insights into how pharmaceutical sales professionals navigated and made sense of their work-life balance. The analysis identified four key themes and patterns, providing a deeper understanding of the pressures in a high performance-driven. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which helped to identify key themes and patterns in what participants shared. This study employed purposive sampling as it was recognized as a standard qualitative research technique for selecting informative cases which relate to the research topic (Patton, 2002). Using purposive sampling suited phenomenological research since the method allowed the selection of participants who have direct and lived experience with the investigated phenomenon of work-life balance among pharmaceutical sales professionals in Johor Bahru, Malaysia (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Selection criteria further considered a minimum of one year of work experience in pharmaceutical sales, willingness and availability to participate in the study and their capacity to express experiences reflectively (Bernard, 2002; Spradley, 1979). The selection technique allowed selected participants to deliver extensive and context-specific information needed to study intricate personal experiences around a distinct professional and cultural setting. Twelve to twenty participants were selected for this study, following established qualitative research

practices. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that key themes in qualitative interviews often start to repeat after about 12 interviews, indicating that this number is generally sufficient to reach saturation. Nevertheless, only 9 participants were ultimately selected for the study. This was determined by the fact that similar trends and key points had already begun to emerge, making it clear that further interviews would be unlikely to produce significantly new information. This is corroborated by Guest et al. (2006), who revealed that thematic saturation may be achieved within 6 to 12 interviews based on the study design and the homogeneity of participants. Besides, the time available in the research schedule made it difficult to complete the originally intended 12 interviews. The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with pharmaceutical sales professionals because they provided the flexibility to ask predetermined questions while also allowing room to explore new ideas and themes as they came up.

This study employed thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a well-established approach known for its clear and flexible way of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Throughout the process, all information that identified the participants was either removed completely or transformed into a de-identified form to uphold participant confidentiality. According to Bingham (2023), following a structured data management protocol was vital for upholding the rigor along with trustworthiness within qualitative research workflows. The process mandated data organization for secure storage along with transparent analysis procedures and systematic data management from storage to destruction. The coding and thematic analysis were done manually to organize, sort, and visualize the data more efficiently.

7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent was obtained before the interview, with clear explanations provided about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Confidentiality was upheld by anonymizing personal information and securely storing data, including the use of pseudonyms when necessary. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured they could withdraw from the study at any point if they chose. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional ethics board. These ethical practices aligned with the guidelines outlined

by the World Medical Association (2013), which stress the importance of transparency, respect, and safeguarding participant welfare.

8 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

To establish the trustworthiness of this study, several methodological strategies were applied. Credibility was supported through member checking where participants were invited to review and verify the accuracy of their transcripts or the interpretations derived from their input. Additionally, prolonged engagement with the data further strengthened the depth of understanding of participants' experiences. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed, contextual descriptions of the research setting, participants, and findings, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the results to other contexts. Dependability was maintained through a systematic audit trail that documented all procedures, decisions, and methodological adjustments undertaken throughout the research process. Confirmability was reinforced through the use of a reflexivity journal, which the researcher actively recorded and reflected on own biases and assumptions to ensure interpretations remain closely tied to the data (Lincoln, 1985).

9 LIMITATION

There were a few limitations in this study that needed to be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the small sample size of 9 participants limited the ability to generalize the findings to all pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia. While the goal is to understand the work-life balance experiences in them, a larger sample could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences in this field. Another limitation was the use of self-reported data. Since participants were sharing their own experiences, their responses may be influenced by personal biases or the desire to present themselves in a certain way. As Podsakoff et al. (2003) pointed out, self-reported data can introduce common method biases, which may affect the accuracy of the findings. This is an important factor to consider, especially in qualitative studies where the analysis is based on participants' personal accounts. Lastly, the study may not have captured the experiences of other healthcare professionals with similar field-based demands, such as medical device sales representatives or clinical support employees. As the research focused on pharmaceutical sales professionals, it may not fully reflect the work-life balance experiences of these roles whom fall under the broader category of healthcare workers but involve different daily routines, job

designs, and organizational expectations.

10 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Subsequently, the following findings that the study aimed to uncover are challenges of work-life balance and identified four main themes:

1. Conflicted autonomy and time boundaries
2. Job demands and stress
3. Heavy workload and operational pressure
4. Social support and collaborative coping mechanisms

For conflicted autonomy and time boundaries, many participants reported finding it difficult to set clear time boundaries, despite the fact that pharmaceutical sales professions provide autonomy and freedom to control one's own time. The boundaries between work and personal life are frequently crossed when autonomy is granted, particularly when work conflicts with family obligations or significant events like duties or events that take place on the weekends or in the evenings. Internal conflict resulted from the expectation to be responsive at all times due to continually connected devices, as work demands frequently disrupted personal time.

Despite the fact that autonomy is frequently viewed as advantageous, participants disclosed a hidden challenge in which flexible work can easily bleed into personal time. When work demands conflict with social obligations or family events, the freedom to set their own schedules can backfire. It is also more difficult to fully "switch off" when using digital tools that require constant connectivity. These answers demonstrate how, in the absence of clear boundaries, autonomy can feel more like a blurred responsibility, leading to emotional stress and guilt, particularly when work frequently interferes with personal life.

Even though flexibility is often seen as a benefit, many participants characterised it as a double-edged sword. On the surface, it felt liberating to be in charge of scheduling their own activities and choosing how to spend their time. However, in reality, this independence often resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between personal and professional life. The flexibility occasionally made it more difficult to completely switch off, rather than making more room, particularly when work intruded into weekends, evenings, or family gatherings.

Respondents shared about how challenging it was to juggle both responsibilities when work and personal commitments conflicted. For example, when product launches or campaigns coincided with family gathering or special occasions, or when

doctors could only meet in the morning or after hours. Their desire to be there for their families collided with the constant pressure to perform and be responsive at work led to an internal conflict as a result of these situations.

But when both work and home get intense, like chasing targets during a family event, it gets hard. But when I have product launches or campaigns, it gets overwhelming to balance both ends." - Respondent 1

"But at the same time, being constantly connected makes it hard to truly switch off from work." - Respondent 2

"Still, social obligations like weddings or gatherings can be difficult to attend when work pops up unexpectedly." - Respondent 3

"I feel challenged by how work often overlaps with my personal time. Some doctors prefer to meet early in the morning or after clinic hours, which forces me to adjust my personal schedule." - Respondent 4

"I feel that keeping a consistent routine is a real challenge. Sometimes work clashes with family events or important moments, and it's tough to find a perfect balance." - Respondent 6

"There's also pressure to attend urgent events or discussions with doctors, which can be very demanding and stressful" - Respondent 7

Technology played a big role in this blurred boundary too. With WhatsApp, email, and business apps, participants could be reached anytime, anywhere. Although these tools increased productivity, they also made it harder to switch off and truly relax. Participants felt under constant pressure to be available on 24/7, respond quickly fast, and meet targets, even in the absence of explicit instructions which frequently made it difficult to distinguish between work and personal life. As a result, despite the freedom autonomy provided, many participants felt as though they were in a tug-of-war, balancing expectations, schedules, and the silent pressure to be present at all times.

Researchers refer to this situation as the "autonomy paradox," which states that having control over our schedule does not always equate to having control over our time (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). Derks and Bakker (2014) also found that work might spill into personal time when boundaries are not explicitly defined. As noted by Allen et al. (2013), autonomy alone is not enough, it suggested the need for both personal boundary-setting skills and organizational policies that establish clear limits and truly respect individual time.

10.1 Job Demands and Stress

Participants described the constant grind of chasing targets, churning out reports, and maintaining relationship with healthcare professionals and how these never-ending pushes left them feeling drained and stressed. Although there were no one directly demanded it, there was always an unspoken pressure or expectations to hit or exceed KPIs. Many respondents shared feeling emotionally spent from having to stay adaptable, put on a professional face, and remain helpful under tight deadlines.

Secondly, participants often cited regular reporting, performance monitoring, and the ongoing pressure to meet sales targets as contributing factors to their ongoing stress in relation to job demands and stress. The demands of meeting KPIs, maintaining client relationships, and chasing deadlines often left little time for relaxation, which resulted in mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Leadership styles that disregard individual boundaries and have high expectations also increase stress. Below are the interview scripts from the respondents:

“There’s also this constant pressure to hit targets, even if no one says it outright, it’s there. That mental load can be exhausting.” – Respondent 1

“The long hours on the road leave me physically and mentally drained.” – Respondent 3

“I feel that mental stress is a big challenge now – not just because of the workload itself, but the constant need to adapt and stay updated.” – Respondent 8

“The leadership style of our manager or supervisor plays a big part in whether work-life balance is possible. If expectations are too high or there’s no clear respect for personal boundaries, that affects us mentally and emotionally.” – Respondent 8

“We’re constantly trying to leave a good impression, be helpful, and maintain trust. That kind of emotional labour can be tiring over time, especially when paired with performance expectations.” – Respondent 9

This highlights the unseen emotional work and cognitive overload involved in individualist, output-based jobs such as pharmaceutical sales. The mental health costs were not only due to the amount of work, but also from the constant expectation to be always ready, composed, productive, and available at all times.

This supports the literature review on mentioning workplace stress with its emotional labour and mental overload can create significant barriers to WLB, especially in a self-managed, performance-driven role like pharmaceutical sales (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Similarly, Greenhaus and Beutell

(1985) observed the idea that heavy job demands can spill over into personal life, creating conflicts between work and home responsibilities. It also fits with Sonnentag and Fritz’s (2015) findings that when stress accumulates without sufficient time for recovery, burnout and disengagement quickly follow.

Altogether, the insights stress that workload management and stress cannot be regarded as the issues of individuals only. They require individual coping methods and cooperative elements like realistic expectations, frequent restorative breaks, and supportive leaders that can promote more healthier equilibrium of WLB among pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia.

It is evident that participants are burdened by continuous performance pressure, continuous reporting, and the emotional toll of upholding customers’ relationships. The constant pressure to achieve targets, even when unspoken, will always create mental burden. This exhaustion is further fueled by the lack of support or recognition of boundaries by leadership. This is an indicator of how poor management can considerably damage health and render work life balance a dream.

10.2 Heavy Workload and Operational Pressure

Another significant challenge that emerged was the high workload and operational pressure associated with the role, which built on the previous themes of conflicted autonomy and ongoing workplace stress. Although this job offers autonomy, many spoke about the built up of work, from frequent travelling and client visits to administrative work, digital reporting, staying updated on new products, responding to more requests, and managing follow ups. Sometimes they have to deal with back-to-back meetings and rescheduled appointments that often made their days non-stop. While several respondents mentioned that they have learnt how to use technology to prioritise tasks and stay productive, there was still a lot of operational pressure overall.

These results are consistent with Bakker and Demerouti’s (2007) Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which postulates that burnout, stress, and reduced engagement may arise when job demands, such as workload, are not sufficiently balanced by resources, such as time, tools, or managerial support.

Heavy workloads continue to be one of the main barriers to long-term work-life balance, particularly in high performance-driven roles like pharmaceutical sales. The broader issue of workload regulation still stood out as a structural concern,

although some participants managed by adapting to their time management techniques.

Although the work is self-managing, many participants had to deal with heavy workloads as they have to carry out a lot of administrative and reporting work, including long road trips for consecutive field visits, occasionally postponed appointments, and follow-ups, all of which added to operational pressure. Below are the interview scripts from the respondents:

"I've had to learn to prioritise and sometimes let go of one thing for another." – Respondent 1

"There's no one watching over your shoulder, so you can end up overworking without realising. I feel that technology really helps me stay efficient, I can track my sales, send in reports, and stay connected with my team with all the apps created no matter where I am." – Respondent 2

"I feel that one of my biggest challenges is the travel involved in covering a large territory." – Respondent 3

"I feel that one of the main challenges is the build-up of reporting and administrative tasks." – Respondent 5

"I feel that being able to manage my time helps me a lot, but when work becomes overwhelming—especially with back-to-back tasks and urgent follow-ups—it definitely spills into my personal life." – Respondent 6

"I feel that one major challenge is the increasing load of administrative tasks that come on top of fieldwork." – Respondent 7

Although the position allows for self-management, the intense combination of administrative duties, field trips, and travel frequently makes it difficult to distinguish between work and personal life. Participants discussed how their personal time is frequently consumed by lengthy workdays, frequent reporting, and unforeseen follow-ups. This demonstrates that autonomy does not necessarily reduce the work burden, rather it needs a further concentration of planning and self-control. Without the right help, these demands can throw off work-life balance and make it hard to stick to a healthy schedule.

10.3 Social Support and Collaborative Coping Mechanisms

Participants cited social support from peers, family, and managers as a critical tool for coping with high job pressure and hazy work-life boundaries. Many like Respondent 1, 2, 3 and 8 emphasised the importance of having a supportive manager or an understanding spouse who gave them the freedom to

self-manage without micromanaging. Additionally, informal talks and check-ins with coworkers provided emotional relief that reduced psychological stress and promoted a sense of community.

"I'm lucky that my manager gives us the freedom to manage our own time, and my family is supportive too." – Respondent 1

"Work supports me with autonomy, and my team is quite collaborative, which helps." – Respondent 2

"I feel lucky that my family understands how demanding my job can be." – Respondent 3

"I feel fortunate that my spouse also works full-time, so we're able to coordinate and support each other. We take turns handling responsibilities at home, which definitely helps." – Respondent 8

"The leadership style of our manager or supervisor plays a big part in whether work-life balance is possible. If expectations are too high or there's no clear respect for personal boundaries, that affects us mentally and emotionally" – Respondent 8

Support from peers, managers, and family helps ease stress, but inconsistent leadership and unrealistic expectations often weaken its impact. Therefore, maintaining balance requires leadership style and organizational culture just as much as it does in personal support networks. Without both, employees frequently experience feelings of overwhelmed and loneliness.

10.4 Social Support and Collaborative Coping Mechanisms

However, this support was not consistently experienced. Respondents mentioned that managerial incapacity to empathize and adhere to rigid leadership styles often undermined the intended function of managerial support, leaving them feeling isolated or overwhelmed. When the leaders or managers did not recognize personal boundaries or any emotional needs, support systems that should have served as protective buffers instead turned into an added challenge to maintain the state of balance.

This highlights the duality of social and managerial support as both a potential facilitator and a hindrance to maintaining work-life balance. Participants felt more in charge and emotionally secure when they had some support available. Its absence often intensified existing stressors by demonstrating that the presence or lack of that empathy and flexibility could have a huge impact on WLB experiences.

This theme echoes what was highlighted in the literature review, that lack of social and supervisory support remains one of the challenges in achieving

work-life balance. Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, and Hammer (2011) emphasized that insufficient managerial support is a strong predictor of poor work-life outcomes, especially in high-demand roles like pharmaceutical sales. While social support can ease the burden, its inconsistency across teams and leadership styles contributes to the complexity of sustaining a healthy work-life dynamic.

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to improve WLB among pharmaceutical sales professionals.

11.1 Organizational Level Recommendation

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) in the form of a staggered work schedule, partial teleworking or compressed workweeks should be adopted in organizations. These make the employees manage their time more efficiently, eliminate the exhaustion in traveling, and regain control of the personal commitments.

Supportive leadership is very important as well. The managers ought to be trained in being empathetic, listening to employees, and conducting frequent check-ins to know what employees need in terms of the work-life balance. The culture that promotes candidness in discussing well-being can make them feel more respected and touched.

There is also a need to redefine performance measures by moving beyond purely sales-driven targets to include qualitative indicators such as customer engagement effectiveness and relationship-building. This will reduce performance pressure while still maintaining accountability.

Collectively, these strategies can lead to better work-life balance, improved morale, and stronger employee retention (Mas-Machuca, Berbegal-Mirabent, & Alegre, 2016).

11.2 Policy Level Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that policymakers and industry associations should consider establishing industry-specific benchmarks and recognition programs that promote WLB among pharmaceutical sales professionals. These could include voluntary certifications or award programs that recognize companies with exemplary WLB practices, for instance, flexible work schedules, field support systems, and mental health protections designed for mobile sales positions like theirs. These initiatives align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8, which exhibits Decent Work

and Economic Growth. This also highlights safety, fairness, and encouraging working conditions, which are important to drive the economy forward.

Multinational pharmaceutical firms can become a role model to these programs and most of them have implemented advanced WLB structures that are common in the West, which are flex-time, limit-setting conventions, flexibility over the way and amount of work accomplishment by employees. Such frameworks however need to be customized in the local style of work that happens in Malaysia where employees are influenced to behave in collectivism and hierarchical based system. The government ministries, or industry bodies, for instances, PhAMA or TalentCorp can work with MNCs to draft best practice into locally relevant advice, making them relevant, practical, and easily accessible to larger as well as small and mid-sized employers. Not only would these benchmarks increase the well-being of employees, but it would also make employer branding and talent retention more successful across the industry. In the absence of such systematic guidance, the WLB initiatives can not only be non-uniform but they can be fractured or biased toward only some groups, further undermining the overall effectiveness of the same (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

11.3 Expand to Other Regions and Roles within Healthcare

This was a qualitative study that specifically captured the life experiences of the PSPs that were located in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. In order to enhance the coverage and the extent of knowledge, subsequent studies should involve respondents from other regions, such as northern Peninsular Malaysia, East Malaysia or smaller towns to examine the impacts of geographic and cultural variations on work-life equilibrium. Besides, it would be important to compare other positions where the similar demands appear within the healthcare industry, such as medical device sales representative, field nurses or clinical support employees. Although they are all included in the category of the healthcare workers, they each have different daily routines, job designs, and organizational expectations. The investigation of this occupational variability might provide a more comprehensive scenario of how different professional positions can balance between work and life in the same industry (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

11.4 Longitudinal Research Design

This study's cross-sectional design makes it difficult to capture how pharmaceutical sales

professionals' experiences with work-life balance evolve or change over time, despite the fact that it offers insightful information about their current experiences. As a dynamic concept, work-life balance is influenced by continuous changes in both the personal and professional spheres. A longitudinal design would provide more precise insights about how work-life experiences change as a result of organizational policies, job changes, or life transitions. Additionally, it would help determine whether coping mechanisms need to be modified or continue to work over time. In the long run, such research could guide more focused and timely interventions to promote employee well-being (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

11.5 Mixed-methods Research Design

Future research might take into account a mixed-methods design, even though this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to thoroughly examine lived experiences. Future studies, however, might think about employing a mixed-methods design, which combines quantitative surveys and interviews, to obtain both in-depth insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of particular problems or coping mechanisms in a broader population. Although this method might take more time and money, it can improve the results by giving them more depth and wider applicability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

12 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how pharmaceutical sales professionals in Malaysia manage their work-life balance, an issue that has not received much attention despite the fast-paced, goal-oriented nature of their work. The study used a

phenomenological approach to document how WLB is experienced personally, impacted by personal values, workplace culture, job demands, and wider social expectations.

They tended to define work-life balance in a more flexible and self-managed way, rather than through fixed schedules or standard working hours. Many of them focused on energy management, autonomy, and planning ahead to stay in control. They often spoke about setting personal boundaries, finding ways to work smarter but not just harder and paving time to rest and recover. This shows that, for them, balance is not something handed down by company policies. Instead, it is something they actively shape through their daily choices and habits to meet the demands of both work and life.

Despite the job's offering of autonomy, many still deal with hazy time zones because of erratic doctor schedules, conflicting events, long hours, growing workload and technological demands. Their stress is increased by these demands as well as the lack of assistance from organization and occasionally even family. Many, however, managed to cope. Support from family, coworkers, and immediate leaders was crucial in keeping them on course, as was strategic planning and time management. Others used exercise as a way to decompress.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms that work-life balance involves managing the constant conflict between personal and professional demands and goes beyond simply having set working hours. This is particularly pertinent in Malaysia and other Asian countries where family responsibilities are highly esteemed. To promote true balance, organization and policymakers need to take this seriously and create more culturally aware policies.

Ethical considerations: Ethical approval was not provided for this study on human participants because this study was conducted in conformance with Declaration of Helsinki involving humans and all its later amendments. This study followed and obeyed the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee of Malaysia and obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee in Malaysia (PA23-2020-ITU3300). The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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