

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND FAMILIAL PROBLEMS OF IT PROFESSIONALS IN KERALA

Introduction

The single most revolutionary development of this age, the IT revolution is credited with ushering in the concept of current spaces into the public imagination. The idea of virtual spaces is made possible by the information revolution and, also the possibility of earning at rates unthinkable until recently. The impact of IT has been ubiquitously felt in the economic domain, and India is believed to be the best IT destination.

It was hoped that the Kerala, with its high literacy, would provide a good percentage of IT workforce, if the education system was honed accordingly. Sensing the IT potential for employment, Kerala has invested a lot of money in government sector and also in public-private partnership mode in developing IT industry in the state.

In the developed countries like Australia, the USA and so on the government has already noticed that the number of students opting for disciplines like ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has come down significantly. This, given the high stakes in IT sector, is due to the poor work-life balance in this sector. While there exist a large number of studies on Work-Life Balance related with ICT Industries in developed countries like US, UK, and Australia, such studies are few and far apart in India. Apparently no work has been done in this area in the state of Kerala. The hiatus in research on this topic is alarming because India is expecting to become an economic power with its human capital. It is expected that this research will throw light on a grey area of job and family environment of IT professionals and help to improve the performance of mutually complementing systems of life and work.

Statement of problem

The researcher knows from her previous experience as a recruiter for IT companies that family well-being programs are not common in companies in Kerala. The only logical reason for this lacuna could be either 1) work –life problems do not exist in Kerala or 2) companies are reluctant to address them. The present study is intended to take stock of the current situation in Kerala in the socio-cultural and familial space of IT professionals working in Kerala.

General Objective

To study the socio-cultural and familial problems of the IT professionals in Kerala.

Specific Objectives are

- 1) To study the socio economic back-ground of the employee
- 2) To understand the socio-cultural problems of IT professionals.
- 3) To examine the work environment.
- 4) To study whether there is substantial job stress in the IT industry in Kerala
- 5) To find out whether the stress at work is affecting the quality of their family life.
- 6) To assess the marital quality
- 7) To examine the family environment.
- 8) To estimate the general health status of IT professionals in Kerala
- 9) To review the HR Managers' and other stake holders' awareness on the subject.

Hypothesis:-

- 1) Spending capacity of IT family is high, where both partners are working in IT
- 2) IT work does not affect the general health of professionals significantly.
- 3) IT workers are not interested in 'working from home' option.
- 4) Concerns regarding job security are a major cause of stress among IT professionals.
- 5) The quality of family environment is poor where both partners are working in IT.
- 6) The quality of family environment is enhanced when the position in the organization is on the rise.
- 7) Sexual satisfaction of couples is affected significantly where both partners are working in IT
- 8) Marital quality is found to be in the slump where both partners are working in IT.
- 9) Marital quality is found enhanced when position in the organisation is on the upswing

These hypotheses were tested after analysing of the data collected from 270 software professionals and their spouses using closed ended questionnaires.

Research Methodology and Methods

The study is descriptive cum explorative in nature because there are no studies on this topic specifically dealing with Kerala available. The decision to conduct a descriptive cum explorative study is also prompted by the necessity to understand the general characteristic of the work environment of IT organisations in Kerala, the socio-cultural and familial background of professionals and their family issues related with work. A mixed method approach (a medley of qualitative and quantitative analysis) was explained to identify the issues and conditions among professionals working in the IT segment such as job stress, family environment, marital quality etc. The study has been conducted in three phases; phase-1 of the study was conducted on a small subset of IT workforce– the coterie of pregnant women working in the IT, while qualitative study in phase-2 takes a deeper look into the problem, and quantitative study in phase-3 helps evaluate the hypothesis formulated after phase-2 and validate the inference derived from the qualitative study. Phase-2, being qualitative, is narrative in nature while Phase-3 uses structured questionnaires and statistical analysis to evaluate the hypothesis formed after phase-2. Illustrative cases have also been developed to reinforce the main findings of the study.

Universe of the study

All Software engineers working at US/ European based companies in Infopark Cochin and Technopark Trivandrum, and their spouses.

Sample

In the absence of any official data, the snowball technique was deemed appropriate as a sampling technique for this specialized population, and also because of the difficulty of locating professionals working on a very busy schedule using random sampling methods. This process continued until the list of participants expanded to 279 couples. The data requirement was met on the basis of the following stratification.

- 1) Both the partners are working in IT sector
- 2) One of the partners is working in IT sector and the other in non IT sector
- 3) One of the Partners is working in IT sector and the other is a home manager

Care was taken to include equal number of couples from each group.

Data Analysis:

The quantitative data gathered was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The following statistical tests were performed to analyze the data collected:

Descriptive Statistical measures: Percentage, Ratios Mean, Median and Standard Deviation

Inferential statistics: ANOVA, t test, Chi-square, LSD, Correlation analysis were used for testing of the hypotheses.

Chapterisation

The entire study report is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic and states the problem.

The second chapter deals with the available literature on this topic. It forms the theoretical basis of this study.

Third chapter explains the research methodology. It presents the objective, hypothesis, sampling techniques and data collection.

The fourth chapter presents the demands on career woman in IT industry. It is the report of phase-1 study

Fifth chapter deals with the socio-economic space of IT work culture and its impact on the familial matrix. It is the report of phase-2 study

The sixth and seventh chapter deal with the analysis and interpretation of data collected in phase-3 study. All hypotheses formulated after phase-2 study have been evaluated and rejected or accepted on the basis of the evaluation.

The final chapter provides a summary of findings and puts forward a number of policy recommendations.

Summary findings

Economic Prospects

It has been observed that IT is a lucrative career and it gives financial independence to professionals at a very young age. Gender equality has been observed in the pay pattern. They show significant inclination towards branded commodities which stand witness to the cultural shift after globalization. The spending capacity of IT family is found to be significantly higher when both the partners are working in IT.

Socio cultural findings

IT professionals veer away from the traditional socio cultural practices of life either due to their work schedule or due to the cultural shift. Inter caste marriages are seen to be common among IT professionals in Kerala which is due to their financial independence at a relatively younger age. Presence of parents of professional or partner is found to be common in many families. This is mainly to back them up in child rearing and other house-hold duties. In a nutshell, social involvement of IT professionals is found to be not a very promising one.

Health

Information Technology work is found to affect the general health of IT professionals. The Quantitative analysis, information from key informants and direct observation show that IT professionals face various life style diseases like overweight, hypertension, hypotension, eyestrains, neck/shoulder pains, indigestion problems etc.

Work culture

Work culture is found to be inferior in IT industry in Kerala. Both the qualitative enquiry and quantitative findings confirm that the IT companies are particular in hiring professionals who are committed to be in Kerala due to family bound reasons. Majority are of the opinion that voluntary overtime work to complete the assigned task is a common practice in IT industry in Kerala. Performance linked bonus is the pushing force behind this overtime. Struggle in completing overloaded work, skill updating, discharging family commitments and so on cause stress in professionals. Major portion of the employees do not utilise their leave fully due to overload of work. Working from home option is largely rejected by the employees for fear that their work may encroach into their limited family time. Majority of employees stick to the current employer not due to satisfaction in employment but due to

their inability to move either outside Kerala or within Kerala due to the lack of opportunities or regulatory controls such as MOU of G.TECH. IT employees can be summarily sacked any day without any reason. The Job insecurity is found to cause stress among employees.

Woman's representation

Female representation is found to be higher than that of males in entry cadres, but the percentage goes down significantly in the middle and upper level positions. This is because women leave their career for the family when the family demands increase. Women professionals reach higher positions only at later ages because they take breaks for child rearing and other family bound responsibilities. Women working in IT are found to prolong having children due to career related reasons. None of the IT organizations in Kerala give child care facilities.

Family Environment

Family environment of IT families are found to be inferior in general. The quality of family environment goes down when both the partners are working in IT. The study could not establish a relation between the family environment and the designation of the employee. The problems of children are not precipitated today, but direct observations and discussions reveal a potential degradation on that front.

Marital quality

Marital quality of the IT professionals in Kerala is not a promising one. The marital quality is observed to go down when both the partners are working in IT. The study could not establish a valid relationship between the job status and marital quality. A significant observation is the drinking habit of female IT professionals which stands witness to the degradation of family values. Marriage break downs are found to be on the increase among IT couples. Work-life imbalance is observed as the common cause in degradation of family environment and marital quality.

Stake-holders' awareness of the problem

The government departments concerned like Labour department, IT department, Kerala state IT mission and the officials of the Technopark and Infopark do not have any authentic information on the size of the IT work force in Kerala. Evidently these departments

do not have any hint on the problems of IT employees. The employers are on the lookout for cost reduction and short-term gains.

Suggestions

Need to protect HR in IT.

USA and European countries consider India not only as the prime destination for cheap labour but also as their strategic partner in technological advancement. Continuous maintenance and improvement in the quality of the Human Resource is mandatory to explore this new avenue.

Flexible work environment

It has been opined that workers in a flexible working environment show more organizational commitments. It has also been observed that the family-friendly policy does not make any improvement in organizational commitment of the employee unless it provides a work culture which enables the employees the free and fearless enjoyment of the flexibility. It has been found in this study as well that employees are reluctant to use their available leave because of the work pressure. In such an environment, flexible work hours improve neither the commitment level of the employee towards the organisation nor the work-life balance of the employee.

Work Load Reduction

The employees are found to work overtime to complete the assigned task. Employees do not utilise their leave period fully due to overload of work. So policy change should be made at the organizational level to reduce the work load.

Abandon Overtime

Government should initiate a policy for abandoning overtime. Utilizing the resources overworked at higher pay band will spoil the good will of the industry due to employee burn out. Hence work-time and payscale must be optimized for a win-win situation.

Family time for children The industry leaders also, as part of their business agenda should put in some efforts to make career couples available for their children during after school hours to generate the next level quality employees.

Social involvement

Programs must be designed according to the local needs. In Kerala culture attending funerals, marriages etc have a significant role in the social life. So organization must design a leave policy which does not affect this social involvement as well as the business objective of the organization.

Use Women potential

Education and family systems should incorporate the idea that child rearing and home management is a combined effort of both partners and not a single person's responsibility. Efforts must be taken to inculcate such idea in our social system. To improve the level of women's participation in Software industry the following points are suggested:

- 1) Pregnant women's working hour should not exceed 8 hrs. If the existing client requirement demands more working hours, substitute a pregnant employee with another without cutting into her benefits.
- 2) An order by the government not to lay off any woman during pregnancy for whatsoever reason is an imminent need of the hour.
- 3) Allow feeding mothers to take a break for 6 months with all allowances and full salary. If required let her to take a break for another 6 months without perks or benefits, but without any serious service loss.
- 4) When a woman comes back to the industry after a break she should be given intensive training on new technologies and made competent.
- 5) In return for the investment in terms of manpower updating by the company, the employee remains bonded to the organization for a required period of time. In case of a change in Job within a year of rejoining the employee can be required to adequately compensate the company.
- 6) Incorporate these decisions as part of the quality process of the company and make the employees loyal to their parent organization

Day Care Centers

A good percentage is worried about the lack of support facilities near their work sites. Shared day care center is an option where individual day care centers may not be economically viable for small organizations. The infrastructure providers such as Infopark,

Technopark etc can start such facilities. Carer's room is another option to keep the child/dependent safely while the employees work.

Implementing on the job Fitness program

A significant percentage of IT workforce is found to face health problems. Companies suggest health programs but do not make provision for time. Hence companies should see to it that time is allocated for that.

Starting Health facility Center

Life style diseases are found prevalent among IT employees. The change in family and moral values of Keralites has been observed in this study. This leads to marriage break downs, psychological problems etc. These findings show the necessity of formulating policies for starting the facilities which render the service of allopathic / ayurvedic physicians, marriage counsellors, sexologist, psychologist etc. in Infopark and Technopark campus.

Stress Management/Time Management programs

McDougall (1999) opines that stress management, time management, childcare and counseling services can reduce stress levels and absenteeism. Many Bangalore and Chennai-based companies have already started these programs for the well being of the employees. Companies in Kerala should also facilitate such options. Rather than employing counselors and consultants on an individual basis, companies can think of such facilities as shared services based in Infopark and Technopark. This will certainly reduce the cost for providing these facilities

Include Life Skill Education in curriculum

Introducing life skill education at our higher secondary level of education will help equip our youth in managing work and life equally. Since IT is found to be weak in work-life balance, continuing education in life skills can supplement engineering and technical education discipline as well. An Information Technology worker who has learned these skills as an adolescent will be able to cope with the rigors of his/ her new and demanding role in life better than one without any such training.

Conclusion

Reflected here is the major concern of employers as well as employees about IT work culture being highly demanding at a personal level. The splurge of IT money comes at the cost of the employees severely compromising their life outside work. The employees are of the opinion that, their modern life style is at the cost of their traditional family and social life. There is no way to improve the work-life balance in the present Kerala context. This is the common refrain heard from all the stakeholders in the industry. How work- life balance can be implemented in Kerala in the IT sector to make Kerala a favorite of employee's choice and by implication also employer's choice is a topic for further deeper research for which an opening has been made in this study.