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All's (or Not) Fair in Work and Life? Focus on Females in Information and Communications Technology Through the Prism of Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

The changing nature of employment and work has resulted in new demands and challenges in society, such as work-life balance, that have developed in labor relations as an imperative aspect of a beneficial work environment. Scholars affirm that implementing work-life balance practices aid in achieving better organizational results and improve employee outcomes like satisfaction, commitment and reduced turnover intentions. However, some authors have argued that there are variances between the availability of work-life balance practices in corporations and employees' perceptions of access to such practices. This study's purpose was to explore the professionals' perceptions of work-life balance on managing career and personal life at a telecommunications company. This study adopted a qualitative semi-structured interview method to gather data from 16 participants selected through a purposive sampling method. The results indicated that participants agreed that when they thought about work-life balance, it meant controlling their work and life aspects, like personal interests, family, social and leisure, resulting in a balance over life and work and them being happier and more productive. This study unveiled different perceptions of female information and communications technology professionals. Reflecting that, the study emphasized the advancement of work-life balance practices to encourage and modify employees' perceptions.

⊃ Introduction

The economy and financial needs of the family have made the women come out of the home and work for a livelihood. Women try to perform various jobs and sometimes may choose difficult jobs to satisfy the above needs (Padma & Reddy, 2013). The evolving intricacies of modern organizational work and personal aspects of life, the perceptions of work-life balance by employees in coping with work, and other parts of the life sphere offer significant challenges to the modern worker. In every person's life, work and family are the two most important domains.

One of the significant changes witnessed in the labour markets in South Africa has been the entry of women information and communications technology professionals in the rapidly growing software services sector. As the women take on working professionally and their traditional role of the homemaker, they are under tremendous pressure to balance their work and personal lives. Padma and Reddy (2013) note that women play an active role in their country's economic development. Earlier, the woman's role was limited to household activities,

but the present educational and infrastructural facilities have encouraged women to occupy prominent positions in the corporate world.

Work-life balance has come to the centre stage in the last few decades and has become a hot topic pursued by researchers and human resources (Dave & Purohit 2016). Dave and Purohit (2016) continue by stating that work-life balance serves as a major attraction due to its profound impact on all aspects of a person's life. The fact is that work-life balance is a practical aspect, and it largely depends on individual perception. According to Sánchez-Hernández *et al.* (2019), work-life balance is a current concept that may be understood as the existing relationship between work and personal life, and with a significant impact on factors such as health, absence of stress, well-being, quality of life, organizational performance, sustainable human and social development, among others.

Additionally, Townsend and Bugg (2020) highlight that, in the last ten years or so, in both popular and scholarly literature, there has been an increase in conversation on the pursuit of balance between work and professional duties and how people manage their lives outside of work or work-life balance. Nevertheless, Townsend and Bugg (2020) state that, despite this increase in attention to the issue, discussion of work-life balance can be problematic because it infers that there is an ideal work-life balance equation that working professionals should attempt to attain and that this balance might be the same for all people. Townsend and Bugg (2020) contend that, while there appears to be no definitive number or equation for achieving such harmony, the topic has generated scholarly and popular interest in a wide range of disciplines, including business, nursing, psychology and higher education. Townsend and Bugg (2020) also mention that to complicate the subject; further, there is no clarity as to whether achieving work-life balance is the work of the individual, organization, or some combination thereof.

Sirgy and Lee (2018) categorized the definitions of work-life balance into two key dimensions. Within the extent of engagement in multiple roles in work and non-work-life, work-life balance can be defined as "the allocation of time and psychological energy in a balanced way in work and non-work-life while deriving much satisfaction from both work and non-work-life". The second identified dimension of work-life balance is a minimal conflict between work and nonwork roles. Sirgy and Lee (2018) reported the following definition: "work-life balance is satisfaction and good functioning in work and family roles with minimum role conflict".

➲ Theoretical framework

This study utilizes the Boundary/Border Theory by Clark (2000) to frame arguments because of its insights regarding how individuals construct and maintain the boundaries between work and family and associated roles to manage the competing demands of these roles to achieve work-life balance (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000). According to these authors, flexibility is defined as the extent to which the temporal or spatial boundaries are malleable to accommodate another domain's demands. Permeability is defined as the extent to which one domain allows an individual to be located physically, but involved in another domain behaviourally or psychologically. Ashforth *et al.* (2000) state that, according to Boundary/Border Theory, different people have different preferences for how much they like to separate or integrate their work with other aspects of their life.
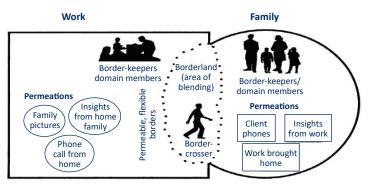

Figure 1. Boundary/Border Theory

Source: Clark, 2000, p. 754.

The central focus of Boundary/Border Theory (Clark, 2000) is that borders and bridges between work and family must be appropriately managed to create and maintain a desired balance. Clark (2000) asserts that physical, temporal and psychological borders define the border/borderline at which work and family begins or ends. Clark (2000) continues by saying that a borders' strength depends on its ability to prohibit flow from one direction but not the other (permeability) and bend toward one direction to accommodate the demands of one domain or another (flexibility). Fleck *et al.* (2015) assert that information and communication technologies (ICTs) continue to give people increased flexibility about when and where to work and the freedom to deal with home tasks while at work. Boundary theory also predicts that family-work conflict manifested through boundary violation experiences should influence employees' appraisal of their success in balancing work and family demands and hence the affective review. Work-family conflict can be considered an accumulation of boundary violations (Hunter *et al.*, 2019).

The next section looks at the study's problem statement.

⊃ Statement of the problem and objectives

According to Borah and Bagla (2016), maintaining a balance between personal and professional life has become an essential matter in society. Employees struggle to circumvent their work and non-work duties and responsibilities. The expression of a work-life balance was first used in the mid-1970s to describe the balance between one's work and personal life. In recent times, Santos *et al.* (2023) assert that work-related ICT use after-hours and work–family/life management, as an area of concern resulting from technology's steady and rapid advancement and invasion by work-related matters of domains that are becoming increasingly less private, have emerged as areas of growing empirical research. Its relevance is particularly related to the recent events associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that rapidly made teleworking (and working from home during the lockdown period) a worldwide work modality choice for many occupations. Prakash (2018) asserts that the changing composition of work and non-work spheres of life has been highlighted in several studies, leading to different conceptualizations and definitions of work-life balance. There is a lack of consistency in defining work-life balance in organizational behaviour literature. This variety has enriched the field of work-life interface studies by giving several perspectives for approaching employees' work-life problems and provided vast knowledge that can be applied to several industrial and organizational situations.

While some studies have focused on the narrow aspect of work-family balance (Ferguson *et al.*, 2012), minimal attention has been given to the broader aspect of work-life balance. Notably, this research is significant because recent researchers have called for conducting further studies on work-life balance, including women (Achour *et al.*, 2017), especially within the context of a developing economy (Katiyar *et al.*, 2018), as compared to many instances from the developed and Western contexts (Bosch *et al.*, 2018). The growing number of women in the South African workforce has led to an increasing interest from academia and practitioners in work-life balance, explicitly working women in the information and communications technology industry. In the light of the growing number of women in the information and communications technology industry, there is a need to examine the work-life balance perceptions and management of South African female information and communications technology professionals in greater depth.

Thus, this article aims to explore perceptions of work-life balance on the management of female information and communications technology professionals' career and personal life.

The objectives of this article are:

✓ To explore perceptions of work-life balance on the management of female information and communications technology professionals' career and personal life.

✓ To evaluate how female information and communications technology professionals integrate work-life balance.

The current paper is structured in three parts. The first part looks at the literature on work-life balance. The second part explores the work-life issues regarding management and perception of the 16 females captured through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The final part discusses the emerging themes from the narratives,

considering the literature on work-family balance. It concludes on how working female information and communications technology perceive and manage their lives.

⊃ Theoretical background and literature review

Work-life balance has been drawing increased interest among researchers, professionals, practitioners and policymakers worldwide because of its potential to increase positive outcomes for both organizations and individuals (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, rapid changes in socio-cultural patterns, demography, globalization, technology and increased women's participation in the workforce have made work-life balance more important, since focusing on one sphere positively affects the other spheres of life (Kossek & Lautsch 2018). The ability to reconcile work and private life is a matter relevant to all employees, though not all may seek "balance" (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2018). Biron *et al.* (2014) believe work and family life have separate responsibilities requiring attention, physical presence, and time, often causing friction with the other. Not only can work-life balance be suggested a problem for women who are caring for a family, but for all female employees, whether married, single, separated, divorced, widowed in a relationship and if there is no balance, some challenges arise hence Munyeka (2021), rightly asserts that work-life balance is about forming and preserving supportive and healthy work environments, enabling employees to balance work and personal responsibilities, thus strengthening employee loyalty and productivity.

The information and communications technology sector in South Africa is one of the biggest employers and one of the largest contributors to the economy. A 2017 survey of the information and communications technology workforce indicated that employment figures in the information and communications technology sector were skewed more favourably towards men (Statistics South Africa, 2017). This scenario was an imbalance, as Schofield (2017) asserts that more than half of the South African workforce consisted of women. Ryklief (2018) stated that the information and communications technology skills landscape remained an object of conflicting reports in South Africa. Paradoxical views described South Africa as either facing a critical shortfall of skilled information and communications technology professionals or oversaturated with qualified information and communications technology professionals.

The next section provides a brief overview of the South African information and communications technology sector.

■ The South African information and communications technology sector

Studies on the information and communications technology sector's profile revealed a predominance of male workers, particularly in the core information and communications technology workforce and at the more senior levels. Statistics indicated that women in South Africa made up a mere 20 percent of the information and communications technology sector workforce, instead of the 56 percent representation globally (SA News, 2016). According to the Media, Information Communication Technology (MICT) report for 2015, male dominance was still evident at 65 percent for more technical skills in electronics, IT and telecommunications, while female dominance was apparent in the advertising and electronic media and film sub-sectors (MICT SETA, 2013).

Research by Du Plessis and Barkhuizen (2012) also found that women's participation in science, engineering and technological careers had significantly increased over the last 20 years.

Based on the previous statements, it was established that the information and communications technology in South Africa was well developed. The issue rested on developing a well-established information and communications technology strategy incorporating all that operate in it, especially females in the information and communications technology profession. Thus, the importance of gaining a good understanding of the female professionals' experiences engaged in information and communications technology, in terms of how they balance their work lives in a demanding field such as information and communications technology.

This current study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and according to Munyeka and Munzhedzi (2022), the COVID-19 outbreak raised exceptional ethical predicaments because it made demands on society from all sectors of life, not only in Sub-Saharan Africa but across the globe, and in this respect it led to a new perception of how work-life balance is perceived.

The link between information and communications technology and telecommunications is that information and communications technology is an extensional word for information technology. Information and communications technology emphasizes the role of unified communications (examples including instant messaging, voice and data communications), as well as the combination of telecommunications (telephone lines and wireless signals), including computers, relevant enterprise software, middleware, storage and audio-visual systems, that allow operators to access, accumulate, disseminate and use information. A telecommunications organization was the setting for the current study, so it was imperative to discuss the South African telecommunications industry.

The next section provides a literature review of work-life balance and women and their perceptions.

■ **Work-life balance and women**

An early study by Pandu *et al.* (2013) found that work-life balance was becoming an area of growing concern in the information technology and information technology enabled services sector (ITeS). More recently, Adame *et al.* (2016) found that work-life balance literature reported a positive relationship between female workers' presence and the implementation of work-life balance measures. According to Wayne *et al.* (2015), one approach to conceptualizing work-life balance is from a global measurement perspective, which focuses on employees' general impressions of managing work and home demands. More recently, according to Bhatt (2021), although work-life balance has been assumed to involve equal amounts of time to paid work and non-work activities, more recently, the concept has been recognized as more complex and has been developed to incorporate additional components.

According to Sundaresan (2014), traditionally, women have been looked upon as nurturers and caregivers and assigned all roles related to maintaining and managing a family. Sundaresan (2014) states that men perceive themselves as breadwinners, and society also expects them to perform work roles to earn and support the family. However, the workforce's nature has been changing, and the percentage of men as wage earners and women as homemakers has been rapidly declining. Sundaresan (2014) asserts that women often find it more challenging to maintain balance because of the competing pressures of work and demands at home. Working women must handle their balance carefully and skilfully blend their roles to optimize their potential in all quadrants of life.

Powell and Chang (2016) highlighted that "women entering the information and communications technology sector in South Africa faced challenges such as work-family balance issues, the undervaluing of women's contributions at work, adverse stereotypes of women, the relative absence of women role models, re-entry difficulties because of the rapid pace of change in information and communications technology, and a lack of guidance on career options".

■ **Perceptions of work-life balance on the management of career life and personal life**

In a transitioning society like South Africa, where the traditional roles of women as homemakers and caretakers are deeply entrenched, work-life balance becomes a challenge for women and their employers.

Maintaining a work-life balance for women, who are increasingly getting more share of the workforce worldwide, is often a tricky issue. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where traditional structures are not responsive to assisting women workers in keeping a balance between home and workplace responsibilities. Social and cultural values put more demands on women in more traditional societies (Grünenfelder, 2013).

Several studies suggest that family characteristics are likely to significantly impact perceptions of balance (Saleem & Abbasi, 2015). Pandu *et al.* (2013), in their earlier studies, established that the roles and expectations of women and men had changed significantly over the past 50 years. One consequence has been a shift in the importance of work relative to family and leisure. Furthermore, Pandu *et al.* (2013) assert that more women than ever before are now in the workforce, reflecting the rising educational levels, changing societal attitudes and declining birth rates. The unprecedented increase in the number of dual-earner households has increased the likelihood that both male and female workers will have domestic responsibilities and work responsibilities. Managing work and family responsibilities can be very difficult for employees in dual-income families, and nowadays, women are choosing to delay or forego childbearing to pursue fulfilling careers.

In terms of management of work-life balance, Dizaho *et al.* (2016) state that difficulties in balancing the act of work and life occur due to the time-based conflict. This, according to Dizaho *et al.* (2016), is the inability to balance time and strain-based conflict. Strain-based conflict refers to the strain that occurs due to failure to achieve balance and behavior-based conflict, which refers to behavioural changes detrimental to work and personal life, due to the inability to balance work and life spheres.

According to Padmanabhan and Kumar (2016), it is very evident that career-oriented women have to manage/balance work and life due to stereotypic roles played. Information and communications technology female professionals have agreed that their career advancement is influenced by work or personal life enhancement. The study by Padmanabhan and Kumar (2016) also highlights that information and communications technology female professionals have said that they have been affected by gender due to various reasons on work interferences with personal life and career advancement. It is evident that there is a concern among female professionals working in shifts, and it does bring in work on family conflict and family on workplace conflict.

Figure 2 depicts how career and personal lives link to perceptions of work-life balance by female information and communications technology professionals.
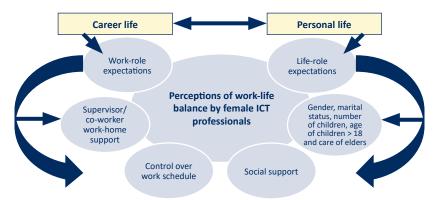

Figure 2. Career and personal lives link to perceptions of work-life balance by female ICT professionals

Source: Self-elaboration.

■ **The link of work-life balance and information and communication technologies (ICTs)**

Colbert *et al.* (2016) assert that ubiquitous information and communication technologies such as the internet and smartphones have blurred the lines of demarcation between work and non-work. Wang *et al.* (2019) additionally state that the employees' transit between life roles more frequently and effortlessly facilitated by information and communications technology.

There are authors like Leung and Zhang (2017) who demonstrate that greater permeability increases exposure to stressors like work-family conflict. Work-family balance is singular and all-inclusive allowing for a wider view of assessments concerning the interaction between work and family (Wilson *et al.*, 2018). Nam (2014) concludes that technology use shapes an individual's perception of flexibility and permeability regarding balancing work and life spheres. Technology use determines an individual's type of work-life balance. Technology use affects the individual's resulting experience because of work-life infiltration.

⊃ **Data and methods**

■ **Preparing for data collection**

At the commencement of the study, when the researchers approached the telecommunications company, the first point of call was the Human Resource Manager of the telecommunications company, who then introduced the researchers to the female information and communications technology employees of interest. The researchers were given a list of the names of the information and communications technology employees of interest, with their

respective e-mail contact details. The researchers then contacted the employees and requested them to participate in in-depth semi-structured interviews, based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

■ **Data collection**

Another study of a similar nature, by Munyeka and Maharaj (2023), was done in South Africa to ascertain female information and communications technology perceive work-life balance. The study employed an exploratory study with participants who felt a sense of collegiality and camaraderie at work, which improved their sense of self-worth and provided them a sense of belonging. This is closely related to the current study, and since there are no other studies in the context of the South African information and communications technology, which attempt to capture the unique dimensions of women's participation in work and their perceptions in managing life and work, an exploratory study was deemed appropriate. Reiter (2017) explained that "exploratory research assumes causal necessity in the world, but only for suggesting a helpful and useful way of explaining it".

Exploratory research is justified for this study, since the work-life balance experiences of female information and communications technology professionals are an existing phenomenon, hence the need to gain familiarity and obtain new insights into their experiences, to identify a more accurate description or explanation of the problem.

Participants were invited via e-mail and interviews were held during October 2018 and January 2019 and again in January to April of 2020. Participants were asked to answer a total of 25 open-ended questions about their perceptions of work-life balance. The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used, which covered the following topics: biographical information such as education, age and race, work and family background, work-life related questions, work-related questions, home-related questions, perceptions and management of work-life balance.

The participants were encouraged to illustrate how they reached decisions or how they perceived and managed their work-life balance through specific examples.

The researchers then conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 16 employees. 16 female participants were chosen by way of utilizing semi-structured approximately one-hour interviews. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

■ **Sampling procedure**

In answering the research question, a purposive sample of 16 women working in three information and communications technology departments, namely, the information and communications technology, information technology, and auxiliary services were invited to participate in the study via e-mail. The study employed a non-probability sampling strategy utilizing purposive sampling, given that the study aimed to select participants that would best answer the research aims and objectives of the study, and this technique was utilized to obtain the right sample that could provide the researcher with the required information. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) stated that, in non-probability sampling, the population element did not have a predetermined chance of being selected as sample subjects.

Non-probability sampling using purposive sampling was chosen for this qualitative stage of the study, based on the researcher's existing knowledge of female information communications and technology professionals. A limited number of participants had the traits the researchers were interested in, as information had to be specific to only a select few that were required for the study.

The selection of the sample was also examined. The explanation of the research process was aimed at ensuring the credibility of the research, thus the assertions that it made in adding to the body of knowledge of work-life balance with regards to female information and communications technology professionals within the South African context.

■ **Data analysis**

After completing the data collection process, member checking was conducted by reading the recorded responses back to each participant. This was done to ensure their responses have been correctly documented.

This will guarantee the interpreted meaning of the answer given is the same as the recorded meaning and ensure internal validity, therefore guaranteeing the findings' trustworthiness. To analyse the data, the authors used a two-stage process.

The researchers checked if the generated themes were related to the codes and the entire data set. This part required the researchers to look at the details carefully, having to go through a do-over of the whole process, revisiting the codes, and ensuring no repetitions. If some of the codes were collated together, the themes would be refined for enhanced precision. To reduce the number of codes and remove those deemed redundant, they were further categorized into families, which finally produced themes. In the thematic approach, the number one step was organizing the data, and the current study proposed that this be done by recording the transcripts of the interviews after the participants had gone through the whole interview schedule.

■ **Socio-demographic characteristics of participants**

16 female information and communications technology professionals participated in this study. The participants' age ranged from 20 to +50 years, with the highest age representation of the 31-40 years age range group (31.25 percent). Most of the participants were married (50 percent), while 37.5 percent were single and only 12.5 percent were divorced. 12 participants (75 percent) had dependent children, and the average participants had one child. 16 participants were Operations specialists, Senior data management managers, Junior information and communications technology technicians, Systems technicians, information and communications technology Technicians, and Database network administrators, who ranged from lower-level personnel to managerial level. Table 1 summarises the study demographics.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Aliases	Age range	Marital status	Dependents	Race
Participant 1 – Operations specialist	20-30 years	Married	2	Black
Participant 2 – Senior data management manager	31-40 years	Single	0	White
Participant 3 – Junior ICT technician	31-40 years	Divorced	1	Black
Participant 4 – Operations specialists	41-50 years	Married	2	Black
Participant 5 – Senior data management manager	41-50 years	Single	3	Mixed race
Participant 6 – Junior ICT technician	31-40 years	Married	0	Mixed race
Participant 7 – Junior ICT technician	31-40 years	Single	1	White
Participant 8 – Senior data management manager	31-40 years	Single	3	Black
Participant 9 – Senior data management manager	51 or more	Married	2	White
Participant 10 – Junior ICT technician	20-30 years	Single	1	Black
Participant 11 – Systems technician	20-30 years	Single	0	Black
Participant 12 – ICT technician	41-50 years	Married	2	White
Participant 13 – Systems technician	41-50 years	Married	1	White
Participant 14 – ICT-Technician	51 or more	Married	2	White
Participant 15 – Database network administrator	51 or more	Married	0	Mixed race
Participant 16 – Database network administrator	51 or more	Divorced	1	Black

Source: Self-elaboration.

⮎ **Findings of the study**

Most participants reported that they struggled to keep a balance between work and family life. Participants argued that maintaining this balance was very difficult because they had to play multiple roles at home and in the workplace. Some argued that they get support from their family members. Others reported that they had to sacrifice their time to keep the balance. Some of the participants identified their efforts and personal abilities that helped them to manage these roles.

Using interviews, themes and sub-themes emerged, and the qualitative data gathered in this study was analysed through thematic analysis. Overall, findings could be categorized into two main themes that could be broken down into sub-themes and categories. The following key theme and sub-themes were identified in this study:

✓ **Main theme:** *Interpretations of work-life synergy*, with **sub-theme 1**: *Career women's perceptions of ideal/perfect balance at the telecommunications organization (balance between their private and career lives* and *no balance between their private and professional lives)*;

✓ **Main theme:** *Interpretations of work-life synergy*, with **sub-theme 2**: *Evaluate how female information and communications technology professionals integrate work-life balance at the telecommunications organization (long-term possibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life* and *long-term impossibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life)*.

Table 2 depicts the main theme of interpretations of work-life synergy according to career women's perceptions of work-life balance on the management of career and personal life and its respective sub-theme.

Table 2. Career women's perceptions of work-life balance on management of career and personal life

Main theme	Sub-theme 1	Frequency	Percentage
Interpretations of work-life synergy	*Career women's perceptions of perfect balance at Telkom*		
	Balance between their private and career lives	14	87.50
	No balance between their private and professional lives	2	12.50
Total		16	100.00

Source: Self-elaboration.

■ **Sub-theme 1: Career women's perceptions of perfect balance at the telecommunications organization**

The sub-theme on career women's perceptions of ideal/perfect balance showed no such thing as a perfect balance. The participants stated that these were aspects that increased the stability of the balance. Women, often being the primary household managers, must give so much more in terms of time, which usually leaves them with little or no time at all for themselves. Participants 2 and 3 stated that their ideal balance would be a set-up where they can work freely, have supportive superiors, support from the organization, do what they love at home, and experience happiness at work from enjoying what they do. Three participants all acknowledged the support of the organization and their superiors. Participant 10 explained: "I can ask for leave or days off to attend to my issues, and this gives me space to balance my work and home life." Participant 4 stated: "I love this organization (the telecommunications organization) because it assists me in doing my work and strikes a balance with my home life whenever the need arises."

From the above responses, an ideal balance would encompass elements of flexitime, related to the participants' need for supportive supervisors, the ability to pursue personal ambitions and passions, and the organization's ability to support workers in many other work-related aspects. This translates into the ideal balance when employees are happy at work; they are comfortable at home.

The next theme looks at interpretations of work-life synergy and Sub-theme 2 which is the evaluation of how female information and communications technology professionals integrate work-life balance at the telecommunications organization.

Table 3. Career women's experiences of work-life integration at the telecommunications company

Main theme	Sub-theme 2	Frequency	Percentage
Interpretations of work-life synergy	*Career women's experiences of work-life integration at Telkom*		
	Long-term possibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life	11	68.75
	Long-term impossibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life	5	31.25
Total		16	100.00

Source: Self-elaboration.

■ **Sub-theme 2: Career women's experiences of work-life integration at the telecommunications organization**

Sub-theme 2 looked at career women's experiences of work-life integration at the telecommunications organization; it explored the participants' views on the long-term possibility, and long-term impossibility, of a balance between personal life and career. Work-life integration explores the synergy between all aspects of work, life, home, family, personal well-being and health.

11 participants indicated that there was a long-term possibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life. Participant 2 expressed the same sentiments as the others, stating that "the long-term possibility between private life and career was possible because more women are entering the workplace, and this is leading to the telecommunications organization having to accommodate them".

The stereotypical nature of the workplace, male dominance discriminatory tendencies, is an aspect that needs serious redress in the South African workplace. Five participants cited the long-term impossibility of achieving a balance between personal and career life.

Participant 4 explained: "If gender stereotypes and discrimination are completely gotten rid of, then women will feel that they are appreciated and will perform well in organizations which will also be good for their private lives."

What stood out more was the issue of gender stereotypes. Participant 1 stated that "as long as there are stereotypical attitudes in society, long-term balance is impractical".

■ **Discussion of findings**

✓ *Findings according to career women's perceptions of work-life balance on the management of career and personal life*

Findings indicated that most of the female information and communications technology professionals did not struggle with managing a career and personal life. This was in contrast with Jang and Zippay (2011), who explained that women in male-dominated occupations struggled more with work-family conflict than their male counterparts, which was related to the traditional and existing roles of women in the African society. Women occupy multiple roles, such as employee, mother, caretaker, family member, church member and wife. Some women have themselves made the choice, while others were socially enforced. This is also consistent with recent findings by Santos *et al.* (2023), who found a positive and significant association was found between work-related after-hour ICT use and work-family enrichment.

A study by Dizaho *et al.* (2016) confirms that due to the increase of women in the workforce and the fact that women are still the primary caretakers of children. Working mothers are confronted with the challenges of balancing the role of motherhood, as well as that of an employee which generated the idiom known as work-family conflict.

A further study by Gallhofer *et al.* (2011) also added that, despite the general use of work-life balance systems, this aspect of life remained a challenging area, as it could not be ascertained that balancing career and family responsibilities translated into time divided equally. Against the background of the participants, there were gender disparities between men and women and the way women were treated in the information and communications technology sector. The current study findings are consistent with Padmanabhan and Kumar (2016). They assert that work-life balance and work-life conflict have been a concern and a real issue among the information and communications technology women professional respondents. The importance of work-life balance and work-life conflict is dual. It does provide disturbance in motivation, job satisfaction, self-confidence, career growth, balancing life and career, and encouragement.

Findings showed that the demanding roles of caregiver and homemaker, as well as the fast-paced information and communications technology sector, placed time constraints on females, thus playing a role in the female information and communications technology professionals' struggle with managing the two domains of life. This was confirmed in various studies by James *et al.* (2006), Webb and Young (2005) and Kirkup (2002), who

stated that, from current debates, there appeared to be a growing perception that the IT industry was not providing an equal platform for men and women. Further findings also showed how the aspect of time on activities in the domestic sphere of life impacted the females' struggle with work-life balance. This was in line with Gurer and Camp (2001), Wangmo *et al.* (2004), Reddi and Vemraju (2006) and Upadhya (2006), who explained that this disproportionality was mainly caused by time limitations on women, because of their triple roles (caregivers, housekeepers, breadwinners) along with cultural and societal biases and barriers, that prevented full engagement. The findings were also in line with Favero and Heath (2012), who found that women spent three times longer on domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and washing.

✓ *Findings according to career women' experiences of work-life integration at the telecommunications organization*

The findings of the study indicated the perceptions of ideal balance in terms of work-life integration at the telecommunications organization. In terms of perceptions of work-life balance, findings indicated that there are home responsibilities. Findings also indicated a consensus that no form of perfect work-life balance existed. This was confirmed in a study by Murphy and Doherty (2011), who found that it was difficult to measure work-life balance in an absolute way, as there were personal circumstances that influenced the perception, establishing a harmony that reflects an individual's priorities. The employees needed to draw a firm line between their personal home lives and work lives, and be confident that the line was in the right place.

Additionally, the findings of the study were in line with Clark's (2000) claim that there was no level of work integration or segmentation to achieve work-life balance. Rather "communication and central participation" in each domain were the keys to negotiating work-life conflict. The responses in this study showed that an ideal balance encompassed flexitime, and this was indicated by various responses from participants, acknowledging to have supportive supervisors, the ability to pursue personal ambitions, the ability to pursue personal passions and the organization's support in many work-related aspects.

Findings showed that the employees' perception in terms of the long-term possibility or long-term impossibility of work-life integration at the telecommunications organization was that there were rigid employers who refused to make any such changes or could not redesign jobs and careers into family-friendly formats. This resulted in the employees' perception that the long-term possibility of work-life integration could not be realized. This was in line with Frome *et al.* (2006) and Geertsema (2007), who indicated that women had many responsibilities, both at work and home, and so would benefit from flexible working hours. However, that flexibility was lacking in male-dominated industries, which drove women away. A study by Bhatt (2021) confirms that to achieve work-life balance, every woman should set the goal and excel both in her career and her family. Some of the strategies and skills at work, such as planning, organizing and setting limits, can be used at home and the workplace for accomplishing a satisfying and fulfilling well-balanced life both professionally and personally.

Further findings revealed that it was impossible to have a long-term balance between personal and professional lives. The participants with children affirmed it, and the young females yet to have children also expressed concerns about it. Findings revealed that for women who wanted to take a more balanced approach toward their work and personal lives, there were inadequate chances for challenging part-time, job sharing or flexible work. This was in line with the findings by Lewis *et al.* (2007), who highlighted that work-life balance policies aimed for quick fixes – tilting the scales just a little to achieve the mythical balance, and rarely seeking more fundamental change. This is also consistent with the findings of Munyeka and Munzhedzi (2022), who claimed that the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic had an impact on life and changed how people perceive work and life, as well as how they balance the two spheres of life and work.

■ **Theoretical implications**

This study contributes to the scholarly literature from several aspects. Foremost, it enriches the understanding of the female information and communications technology professionals' perceptions of work-life balance on managing career and personal life in a South African context. This work fills an acknowledged gap in the research

field regarding how females perceive work-life balance, especially in a male-dominated field of information and communications technology.

This research offers an essential contribution to the person-environment fit literature by emphasizing the significant role of integration preference in employees' perceptions of work-life balance and their status as information and communications technology employees. Finally, the findings expand the research on boundary theory in a meaningful way. The study opposes that segmentation preference is not unidimensional and focuses on the family-to-work direction. Thus, to examine boundary theory further, it should incorporate the concept of bi-directional segmentation preference. This study adds to the gap in the existing body of knowledge of the work-life balance domain in many ways, particularly that of female information and communications technology employees within South African organizations.

■ **Practical implications**

The results of this study have several practical implications that should be beneficial to individuals, organizations, managers and business owners in terms of a deeper understanding of the implication of a healthy balance between work and family demands, and employee's perceptions and management of their two life domains.

According to Wang *et al.* (2019), given the information and communications technology' prevalent embeddedness in the workplace, organizations and employees themselves cannot restrict information and communications technology' access from personal purposes completely. Reducing family-to-work conflict (FWC) caused by information and communications technology usage and strengthening work-family balance satisfaction is critical for organizations.

From employees' perspective, a better comprehension of the importance of balancing work and family demands could help recognize the areas that negatively affect their wellbeing. This could allow them to address these issues by seeking access to family-friendly initiatives to improve their work and family satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

From an organizations' point of view, this study should give employers better acumens regarding connections between work-life balance and employees' wellbeing, perceptions, management strategies or coping mechanisms, and their impacts on employees' commitment, absenteeism, turnover, productivity and overall performance. The obtained information could help organizations improve, develop and implement work-life balance policies or practices.

Organizations, managers and business owners could consider the consequences, perceived attitudes and behaviours regarding work-life balance, as they impact business productivity and performance.

■ **Managerial implications**

Before this study, little was known about female information and communications technology professionals in telecommunications within a South African context. Despite studies carried out on women in terms of work-life balance, no South African research has been done in the telecommunications sector. This study explored female information and communications technology professionals' perceptions in trying to balance their work and non-work responsibilities.

As rightly put by Singh (2013), work-life balance initiatives are said to start at the top with management and permeate down the different levels of the organization. It is therefore argued that management has a strong influential role in pioneering work-life balance initiatives forward. In this light, Singh (2013) also asserts that control of organizations is recommended to change the organizational culture, as organizational culture is the most significant barrier to organizational transformation of any kind.

↻ **Limitations and future research**

Despite the contributions, this study had several potential limitations. Firstly, data was collected at a one-time point, thus limiting the causal interpretations. In this study, missing longitudinal data; it relies on theories

to guide the variables' temporal ordering. Secondly, reliance on self-report measures may present shared method discrepancies. Of particular concern is the sample composition that represents employees with relatively more wealth and work experience and better education, limiting our findings' generalisability to other groups, for instance, less educated blue-collar workers (Liu & Li, 2018). Although the sample contains varied grades of employees, future research can verify the hypothesized framework in more controlled settings. Notwithstanding these limitations, this work provides additional avenues to stimulate future studies. In addition, a challenge encountered in this study was selecting and interviewing participants, due to the scarcity of female managers/employees in the information and communications technology sector. In the future, a comparative study can be sought, and the topic of the study could be extended to other male-dominated industries. In this study, males were not part of the population. Future research could include males and compare them to females to explore how females advance in male-dominated sectors. The perceptions, experiences and views of males could then be compared to those of females. Future research can seek to obtain perceptions, experiences and views of females who previously worked in male-dominated fields and left for gender-balanced organizations to gain a different and richer perspective and compare those to females who currently work in male-dominated sectors.

⮡ Recommendations and conclusions

This study's findings could help the management of the telecommunications company understand its role in creating and sustaining good work-life balance programmes. They would be better equipped to deal with challenges in maintaining a positive work-life balance environment for females, who are now increasingly entering previously male-dominated professions, like information and communications technology. Working information and communications technology females experience work-life conflict due to their position in the organization. This can be from seniors or supervisors, their working hours, the distance they must travel to work and technology. Another recommendation is for the female information and communications technology professionals to create an adaptive lifestyle by utilizing innovative and flexible new ways to navigate work and family life. Modifying work schedules in ways that better accommodate family responsibilities would be one way. "Piggybacking" other commitments or opportunities together to get the best bang for her buck' is another recommendation. Combining family activities, volunteerism, social activities, sporting and other events with friends would also allow everyone to manage their time better, enjoyably and satisfyingly.

The main limitation of this study was its geographic scope and qualitative nature. The sample size was also too small to be generalizable to other industries in the South African context. Future research should focus on a large scale and mixed method utilizing a larger sample to better understand the subject matter.

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