Work-life balance policies in high performance organisations: A comparative interview study with millennials in Dutch consultancies

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Abstract
The literature on work-life balance primarily focuses on how individuals cope with high work demands. This study, however, investigates how young professionals experience the work-life balance support offered by organisations. Twenty-four millennial consultants were interviewed to explore their perceptions of work-life balance and organisational support policies in an extreme work context. Twelve consultants worked for strategy houses with an average working week of around 60 hours, while the other 12 worked for general management consultancies with average working weeks of roughly 50 hours. Our comparative findings suggest that overall work-life balance perceptions stay positive in both settings. In strategy houses, where work pressures are highest, reported policies and practices go beyond health programmes, training and coaching, which are the most common work-life balance measures. Strategy houses monitor their consultants' work-life balance experience weekly, provide options to outsource components of the work, and offer multiple forms of compensation. These further policies are much appreciated. Despite these positive assessments, we also observe an increase of negative work-life balance experiences due to the higher work pressures at strategy houses. There is, therefore, some ambiguity in the work-life balance perceptions of consultants, who recalibrate what are 'normal' work demands and refocus on the bright side of work life. Such occupational ideologies indicate a 'dirty work' experience.

Keywords
Consultancies, extreme work, organisational antecedents, professional service firms, work-life balance perceptions, work-life balance policies

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Introduction

Work-life balance indicates the absence of conflict between work and non-work roles (Frone, 2003). Conversely, work-life conflicts arise when work demands are perceived as overly high, resulting in stress, burnout or reduced job satisfaction (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Research has focused on individual and organisational antecedents that hamper work-life balance to explain work-life conflict (Cowan and Hoffman, 2007; Higgins et al., 1994; Lewis et al., 2007; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Roberts, 2007). Individual antecedents are life cycle (i.e. before or after having a family, taking care of parents) or personality traits. Organisational antecedents can be project-based organising, high-performance demands from managers or clients, or new technologies enabling flexible work. As organisational antecedents differ between types of organisations, the perception of work-life balance differs significantly between contexts as work-life conflict might increase in more extreme work contexts.

Next to antecedents, individual coping strategies also influence the experience of work-life balance. Several cognitive and behavioural strategies can help individuals mitigate work-life conflicts, ranging from the separation of work and life to their integration (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Hubers et al., 2011; Roberts, 2007; Sturges, 2012). Individuals relying on separation strategies try to demarcate work and life domains through various types of boundaries (temporal, physical or relational). Others manage work-life conflicts by integrating work and life domains, for example, by working from home. However, many scholars suggest that we should not only study individual coping but also focus on how organisations influence their employees’ work-life balance experience, which requires multi-level studies (Andres et al., 2012; Blagoev et al., 2018; Eikhof et al., 2007). This research call is timely as firms increasingly claim to develop policies and practices to reduce the experience of work pressures and enhance employees’ commitment (Forsyth and Polzer-Debruyne, 2007) and job satisfaction (Drew and Murtagh, 2005). Such work-life balance policies and practices are especially relevant in the extreme context of high-performance work (Perlow and Kelly, 2014).

High-performance demands are discussed in particular for legal advisers, accountants, bankers, management, strategy or IT consultants and tax advisors (Bacik and Drew, 2006; Lewis et al., 2007; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016; Michel, 2011; Scholarios and Marks, 2004; Ylijoki, 2013). These examples concern professional service firms and neo professional service firms like consultancies (cf. Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Consultants, for instance, can be confronted with high client demands, often experience conflicting deadlines when working on several projects, and their managers foster a high-performance culture (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Gill, 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Morrell and Simonetto, 1999; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016; O’Mahoney, 2007). Additionally, the Big 3 strategy houses and Big 4 management consultancies have a very young workforce due to their up-or-out policies. Among consultancies, Big 3 strategy firms and their direct competitors are the most demanding companies. Work-life balance policies could be adapted to such extreme work settings, as standard practices might not suffice. Still, attention for contexts in studies of such ‘workplace practices figure remarkably little in the current work-life balance debate’ (Eikhof et al., 2007: 326). Moreover, employee perceptions of work-life balance
practices are under-investigated, especially for knowledge-intensive project work (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Fagan et al., 2012; Swart, 2007). Therefore, we explore how young professionals perceive their work-life balance and the available work-life balance policies in extreme work contexts.

We interviewed consultants below the age of 35. Twelve worked for high-end strategy consulting firms with average working weeks of around 60 hours, while the other 12 worked for general management consulting firms, including consultancy divisions of big IT firms with average working weeks of roughly 50 hours. Both numbers are substantially higher than the European average working week of 40.3 hours (2016), or the Dutch average of 39 hours (see Eurostat, 2018). We find that differences due to the work context influence individuals’ work-life balance experiences, but also the work-life balance policies and practices in a more extreme work context are perceived as different.

We contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we respond to Eikhof et al. (2007), Noury et al. (2017) and Blagoev et al.’s (2018) research calls by exploring the impact of organisational context on work-life balance policies and practices (see also Chasserio and Legault, 2010; Duxbury, 2004; Kaiser et al., 2010; Reindl, 2013). We find that while organisational antecedents feel more challenging for strategy consultants than management consultants, strategy houses also respond with new organisational work-life balance policies and practices to moderate their consultants’ work-life balance experience. Second, we answer the research call to study work-life balance perceptions in the context of highly demanding knowledge-intensive work and notice a remarkable ambiguity in these perceptions. On the one hand, organisational work-life balance policies are perceived positively by the millennials in our study, much more so than in earlier studies that surveyed older workforces (Kaiser et al., 2010; Litrico et al., 2011; Noury et al., 2017; Peper et al., 2011). On the other hand, the additional policies in strategy houses cannot prevent more negative work-life balance appraisals. This could mean two things. The additional policies ultimately steer workers towards more work (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Michel, 2011), or the very positive perceptions are the result of normalisation. We observe occupational ideologies like reframing, refo-cussing and recalibrating the dirty work literature uses. Such normalisation tactics usually aim to protect professional self-esteem, for instance, when employees face working conditions that are socially evaluated as relatively harsh or unpleasant (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018).

In the following section, we discuss some theoretical perspectives on perceptions of work-life balance in the extreme work setting of professional service firms. We then explain our methods, present and discuss the results and draw conclusions.

Organisational antecedents and work-life balance policies in extreme work settings

Organisational antecedents and perceptions of work-life balance in professional service firms

Extreme work contexts, as experienced by lawyers, consultants, architects or physicians, are known for perceptions of work-life conflict (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000; Keeton
et al., 2007; Scholarios and Marks, 2004). Such conflict can lead to stress (Greenhaus et al., 2003), clashes with family members (Mette et al., 2019), decreased job satisfaction and increased personnel turnover (Deery, 2008; Morrell and Simonetto, 1999). Such outcomes are deleterious for individuals and organisations (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Geurts and Demerouti, 2002; Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Lambert, 2000).

Several organisational antecedents influence the perception of work-life balance in the context of professional service firms. First, project-based work can generate work-life conflict. Projects imply strong time and budget pressures, and project members must handle potentially conflicting demands from different stakeholders (Pinto et al., 2014; Richmond and Skitmore, 2006). Multiple projects can imply conflicting deadlines (Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016), and consultants may need to travel to client sites daily, which are sometimes far away or even abroad (Costas, 2013). Such project-based work can have a detrimental impact on employees’ health by causing stress, sleep disturbances, and burnout (Brödner, 2008; Cicmil et al., 2016).

Second, client demands influence the work-life balance experience. When clients pay high fees, they expect consultants to bring high added value, which creates pressure. However, these demands also vary with the work culture of the client’s industry. In banking, for example, 80-hour working weeks are common worldwide (Michel, 2011; Mordi et al., 2013), and consultants are expected to adapt to such clients. Client demands can also vary across countries; for example, clients in the United Kingdom expected consultants to spend long hours at their offices, more so than clients in Finland (Meriläinen et al., 2004).

Third, new technologies that enable flexible working can hamper work-life balance by increasing connectivity, flexibility and interruptions during working hours. Increased connectivity allows professionals to work in any place at any time (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Roberts, 2007). Expectations to be online all the time increase employees’ workload (Duxbury, 2004), while an increasing number of emails and telephone calls interrupt the work of knowledge workers and decrease individual productivity (Davis, 2002; Spira and Feintuch, 2005). Technology has also made it more difficult to disconnect from work after office hours (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Otey, 2014). While consultants are selling and implementing such practices, their personal experiences with flexible work solutions have also been negative (Whittle, 2005).

Organisational policies and perceptions of work-life balance

Work-life balance policies and practices are usually designed to moderate the experience of work-life conflict and support or compensate employees aiming for a better work-life balance. Common organisational support policies consist of healthcare arrangements, fitness programmes and dietetic support (Bacik and Drew, 2006; de Janasz et al., 2013a, 2013b; MacEachen et al., 2008; Mayerhofer et al., 2011). Other supportive work-life balance policies are used to settle work (time) arrangements, for example, extended holiday hours, options to work part-time, telecommuting or flexible work time (Brödner, 2008; Mayerhofer et al., 2011; Smith, 2010). Such general HR policies aim to give employees a sense of control over their working hours (Keeton et al., 2007; Tausig and Fenwick, 2001). Work-life balance trainings that aim at skill development are also common (Berggren, 1999; Grawitch et al., 2010; Morrell and Simonetto, 1999). Moreover,
managers, supervisors, coaches and co-workers may offer social support to help individuals achieve a better work-life balance (de Janasz et al., 2013a; Grawitch et al., 2010; Kossek et al., 2011). Creating a trusting culture in which employees’ non-work commitments are respected also positively contributes to employees’ work-life balance (Morrell and Simonetto, 1999; Scholarios and Marks, 2004).

Next to the discussed support policies, compensation policies can also enhance perceptions of work-life balance – non-monetary compensation enhances job satisfaction more than monetary compensation (Nelson and Todd, 2004). Monetary compensation can be in the form of an increased salary or bonuses. The extra money can help employees cope better with non-work stressors, for example, by outsourcing cleaning, childcare and other domestic tasks. However, the impact of monetary compensation is constrained because its effects diminish as soon as employees do not have time to spend the additional money (Cowan and Hoffman, 2007). It is also limited by the extent that employees have non-monetary job expectations (Hines and Carbone, 2013). Non-monetary compensation can include career progress in return for overworking or the development of relevant skills such as stress management, learning to run meetings efficiently, or improved time management (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Grawitch et al., 2010). This is not only compensation as employees can also experience training and development as support.

Work-life balance perceptions, occupational ideologies and normative control

Support and compensation policies aim to positively influence employees’ perceptions of their work-life balance; however, they do not always have this effect. There are several ways in which perceptions of work-life balance can be influenced by social context. For instance, lack of managerial support for work-life balance policies is one of the major reasons why some of these policies are rarely used in professional firms in Germany, the US, The Netherlands and Australia (Kaiser et al., 2010; Litrico et al., 2011; Peper et al., 2011; Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013). Furthermore, work-life balance policies might be perceived as less relevant due to ‘occupational ideologies’ (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 421–423). In extreme work contexts, occupations normalise what others might see as dirty work. Many people consider an expected 60 hour working week socially unacceptable, and indeed working so much might then negatively influence workers’ self-esteem. However, by normalising such practices with occupational ideologies, self-esteem can be protected. This is often done by recalibrating standards, with managers stating, ‘in our field 60 hours is a very common working week, we all work this much’. Another tactic is refocussing, with managers saying, ‘here you really have nice colleagues, and the work is very rewarding’. A third practice is reframing, like ‘in the light of your career the long working weeks here will pay off later’. Such occupational ideologies may influence work-life balance perceptions towards the positive, despite a work-life balance situation that is not ideal in the eyes of outsiders. Such occupational ideologies have been observed in the context of management consulting (Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018) as well as several other high-status professions (Ashforth et al., 2007; Huey and Broll, 2015; Vaast and Levina, 2015), and are used to neutralise the perception of work-life conflict.
Other studies have found a strategic use of work-life balance policies where the organisation actively promotes them. For instance, work time reduction has been promoted as a cost-saving measure in times of budget cuts (Lewis et al., 2017), thus primarily benefiting the organisation. Work-life balance policies have also been used as a means of organisational control in high-performance contexts like consulting, accounting and investment banking (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Michel, 2011). For instance, well perceived work-life balance practices such as providing concierge services like house cleaning, laundry services or providing meals are often promoted in such work contexts, next to fostering integration strategies that make work-life more rewarding. These policies reduced employees’ overall workload by taking over boring household tasks, but also ease employees into working longer hours and spending more hours with colleagues. Work-life balance policies have thus been promoted with very different agendas (Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

These different agendas need to be considered when interpreting work-life balance perceptions. While a common assumption is that work-life balance policies reduce work-life conflict and benefit the employee, this is not necessarily the case. We also wonder whether traditional work-life balance policies sufficiently fit the extreme work context of professional service firms (see Eikhof et al., 2007; Noury et al., 2017; Reindl, 2013). We expect that the use and popularity of such work-life policies might vary across sectors due to factors like management support, occupational ideologies or practices of normative control next to more traditional antecedents. Accordingly, we explore how young professionals perceive their work-life balance and the available work-life balance policies in management consulting’s extreme work context.

Methods

Research context and design

To answer our research question, we sampled young consultants (millennials) employed by two different types of consulting firms in The Netherlands: high-end strategy consulting firms and general management consulting firms. Consulting companies are well-known for their high-performance work culture (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Gill, 2015; Reindl, 2013); however, among consultancies, the strategy houses are the most demanding. To illustrate, Consultancy.uk reports that strategy consultants in the UK, on average, work 20 hours on top of their job contract per week. This appears to happen less for general management consultants, who, on average, work ten hours more than stipulated in their contract per week (Consultancy.uk, 2019). This variation enabled us to investigate how both groups perceive the impact of different high-performance cultures on policies and practices designed to support their work-life balance. In particular, elite consulting firms such as the strategy houses included in our study provide special work-life benefits to boost their employees’ commitment and performance (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006).

We interviewed young millennial (born between 1980 and 2000) consultants. Kaiser et al. (2011) found that younger consultants were as concerned about their work-life balance as older generations. Additionally, the millennial generation is known for its well-articulated interest in work-life balance (Smith and Nichols, 2015). At the same time, the first years
working as a consultant are generally especially demanding (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Muhr et al., 2013). Thus, millennials might be very aware of their work-life balance and the support policies available. However, until now, persons below 35, which are dominant in many professional service firms, have received limited attention in the work-life balance debate, as it has mostly focussed on work-family conflict (Reindl, 2013).

The literature on work-life balance is quite mature; nevertheless, its focus on perceptions of work-life balance policies and practices is more nascent – especially in extreme work contexts. Perceptions of work-life balance are not only dependent on the number of working hours; they are also a subjective experience (Guest, 2002). Our comparative and explorative research design based on semi-structured interviews with millennials, therefore, aligns with the state of knowledge in this focus area (Edmondson and McManus, 2007).

Data collection

We interviewed 24 consultants, a number that fits common demands for a grounded research approach (see Creswell, 2007: 67). Twelve worked at seven general management consulting firms and 12 at six high-end strategy consulting firms. Both groups had an equal share of young male and female consultants born between 1980 and 2000 (millennials). We checked for differences in perceptions of male and female consultants, but did not find them. Potential interviewees with these characteristics were approached via the second author’s networks using LinkedIn, phone or email. The warm connections with former members of a student association, contacts built during an internship at one of the strategy houses, and snowballing were the most effective means of approaching potential interviewees. Interviews were all conducted in 2016 over a period of 5 weeks at locations convenient for the interviewees: via Skype, by telephone, at the interviewee’s office, or a neutral location such as a cafe. The interviews’ duration varied between 20 and 50 minutes. The shorter interviews were with the recent graduates who had less than a year of work experience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Table 1 presents the full characteristics of our sample.

Our Dutch sample shows average working weeks as reported for strategy consultancies (SC) and management consultancies (MC) in the UK (see Consultancy.uk, 2019). All consultants had a 40-hour contract, except MC10 (34 hours) and MC11 (32 hours). Eight interviewees were recent graduates, eight had between one and 2 years of work experience and eight had more than 2 years of work experience, which was, on average, 4 years. The age range of our interviewees was between 24 and 34. Based on an internet search, we found that the average age of employees working for the companies we study is around 30. Alvesson and Einola (2018) report a similar young workforce for the consultancy cases in their article.

The study was conducted in accordance with our University’s guidelines. After their informed consent, all interviewees received a topic list covering six themes: general questions about how they perceive their work-life balance; experience of gender differences and work-life balance; experienced impact of their (growing) seniority on work-life balance; how technological developments affect their work-life balance; experienced organisational support for work-life balance; and comparisons with other firms. We used
an interview guide with semi-structured questions, detailing the topic list. The guide began by underscoring the study’s anonymity, then informing the interviewee in detail about the purpose of the study and asking for some demographic information. All the questions from the interview guide were not always asked to enable follow up on the answers given during the interviews. Still, the six general themes mentioned in the topic list were covered in each interview. As we study employee perceptions, company documents on policies or practices were not included in the study.

### Data analysis

The interview transcripts were coded with Atlas.ti. Codes were developed through several rounds of analysis by re-labelling and refining the codes derived from the interviews (Smith, 2007). This process is referred to as constant comparison and enhances the consistency of the codes (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Our child codes provide a detailed summary of what individual consultants said in vivo. First, we coded indications
of positive, neutral or negative work-life balance appraisals. Second, we coded for organisational antecedents influencing work-life balance appraisals in the context of consulting. The main themes (grandparent codes) here were perceived pressures due to the consulting sector in general (performance, approachability and flexibility expectations, ICT-use), more specific company and business unit pressures and project characteristics. Here our context-specific parent codes add nuance to the already well-known general organisational antecedents. Third, we coded organisational policies and practices that consultants perceive as more or less helpful in managing their work-life balance, which we differentiated in supportive and compensatory policies. We coded the practices within these two general policies to do so on the level of parent codes. We adopted an inductive approach to code for novel practices, like the weekly monitoring in strategy houses, and context-specific experiences. Perceptions of work-life balance, organisational antecedents and organisational policies are our study’s three aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Table 2 summarises all the codes.

The numbers in Table 2 indicate the occurrence of child codes that illustrate the category, separated for strategy and management consultants. These numbers indicate how grounded the parent codes are. Only for self-assessments we report how many consultants expressed positive or negative appraisals, without detailing the variance in positive or negative appraisals in Table 2. All parent codes are well grounded (at least 10 child codes per parent code), but some show substantial differentiation in how often they were illustrated by the words of strategy or management consultants (see the parent codes: negative appraisals, monitoring and training programmes for the strongest variation).
Results

Our findings illustrate how perceived organisational antecedents like project dynamics and industry-related work pressures influence consultants’ experience of work-life balance. They also show how organisational policies are perceived to moderate consultants’ work-life balance experience. Figure 1 previews the relationships between the categories we present in our grounded model based on the codes listed in Table 2.

In the following sections, we illustrate each of the boxes in Figure 1, starting with how management and strategy consultants experience their work-life balance. We then move onto perceptions of organisational antecedents, before concluding with the work-life balance policies and practices in the two extreme work contexts.

Experiences of work-life balance

An important aspect of work-life balance is the number of hours spent on work versus life activities. However, the number of hours alone cannot define balance as the work-life balance experience has many subjective elements (Guest, 2002). Nevertheless, the more the number of working hours exceed the Dutch legal maximum of 40 hours a week, the more pressure there is on life activities. Table 1 indicated an average working week of around 50 hours for management consultants and 60 hours for strategy consultants. For strategy consultants, the following working week is typical:

Mostly, I work on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays until 11:00 PM. And then Thursdays, sometimes I work until late, 10:00 PM, 11:00 PM, and other times I stop at 07:00 PM. Friday evenings I have time off and then a few hours during the weekend. (SC11)

The 50-hour working week of management consultants usually fits within five long workdays. Still, consultants in both groups refer to peaks of up to 80 hours per week, mainly due to project dynamics. Table 3 presents some illustrative quotes of how consultants appraise their work-life balance, given such working weeks.
Table 3 illustrates how MC11 confidently expresses her positive appraisals, while the positive appraisals of SC10 are more ambiguous. SC10, for instance, indicates how her work-life balance has improved, while also admitting that it has not always been good. She also indicates that outsiders might not consider her work-life balance good. Some ambiguity is also visible in positive quotes of management consultants: ‘If I am satisfied with my work-life balance? In general, yes’ (MC2). The ‘in general, yes’ indicates that exceptions occur. However, these negative exceptions surface more in strategy consultants’ quotes.

The difference in appraisals between management and strategy consultants becomes more visible when we ask if they can share negative experiences. Strategy consultants express more frequent and stronger negative appraisals:

Last year was really bad. Then I said, ‘I really need to work less’. It works kind of exponential. If you work 70 hours, you work over the weekend. Then your energy level drops quite fast. Sixty hours is possible for quite a long time, and with 50 hours, you have time for yourself in the evenings. (SC12)

All the interviewed strategy consultants mentioned something negative about their work-life balance, while only half of the management consultants shared such negative appraisals. Given these differences, it does not seem appropriate to consider strategy consultants the main representatives of the consulting sector when it comes to work-life balance. Their negative experiences are more extreme than the Big 4 or Big IT management consultants we spoke to. What does seem a pattern is that almost all consultants start to talk about their work-life balance in positive terms while framing negative experiences as the exception.

**Perceived organisational antecedents of work-life balance conflict**

Although most of the consultants we spoke to framed their work-life balance as positive, they also mentioned negative appraisals, and we explore where these originate from in the context of consulting. Our respondents mention various organisational factors that
hamper their work-life balance, often indicating a combination of time and strain-based conflicts (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). There are pressures caused by the industry culture of working hard and new technologies that enable working anytime and anywhere. Moreover, project-based work is given as an explanation for work-life conflict. Still, consultants tend to normalise these pressures (see also Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018). Table 4 illustrates which organisational-level antecedents were experienced by management and strategy consultants.

**Table 4.** Perceptions of organisational antecedents influencing work-life balance.

| Organisational antecedents | Illustrative quotes |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| **Industry and company pressures** | 'I do not feel direct pressure from my boss or colleagues, but you enter an environment where people consider it normal to work up to 60 or 80 hours a week. And they like to tell you. That makes it difficult, sometimes'. (MC10) |
| 'I notice that I read emails on my phone while travelling. I never reply. You read, but you have to read it again when you reply, so it is a waste of time. I think it is not healthy for us to do so'. (SC2) |
| **Company and business unit pressures** | ‘Within Big 4 consultancies, there is a huge difference between strategy consulting and the rest. Strategy consulting is high-end consulting. . . . At human capital or IT consulting work-life balance is better, although it is still project dependent’. (MC5) |
| ‘If you look at Accenture consultants, they work less than we do. We work between 55 and 60 hours, they [work] between 45 and 50. At Bain, they work more than we do’. (SC5) |
| **Project dynamics** | ‘Often short projects are very intense. That sometimes has its charm, because you get some sort of team spirit that you work hard for it together. But, in general, I do not like to work until after dinner. I just think that is annoying’. (MC4) |
| ‘Once every 3 weeks, I was in The Netherlands for a weekend. To cram your social life in that simply is not possible and after 5 months you miss a lot’. (SC4) |
| **Project nature** | ‘I am currently working on a project that I think is the most socially relevant issue at this moment in time. . . . And when I have to work until 10:00 PM, then it feels as if I am doing that for something good’. (MC4) |
| ‘Especially during this project, about which I am less enthusiastic. . . . Then I notice it costs much more energy to do well and work those long hours’. (SC6) |
| **Project client** | ‘Some clients work 80 hours per week. And then I feel a certain pressure, an obligation, that if they send an email on Sunday afternoon, I really should reply before Monday morning’ (MC10). |
| ‘My current team and client do not work during weekends. Well, then I also do not, I also think it is strange to send something then’. (SC11) |
Industry pressures and work-life balance. Consultancy is experienced as a high-pressure work context in general. Still, for strategy consultants, 60-hour working weeks are normal, while, for management consultants, 60 or 80-hour working weeks are expected to happen incidentally. Communication technologies add new pressures to the work, by enabling constant availability:

If you get a smartphone from your employer, you very often look at it to see what happens. I think mobile phones make a huge difference [for work-life balance]. Skype as well, and the possibility to stay in touch with everyone. (MC1)

Mobile phones also put a new kind of pressure on the work-life balance of consultants by intensifying project work: ‘It depends on the project. . . . Yesterday evening, when I was at home, I have checked my phone three times between 08:00 PM and 11:30 PM. But it is not that I check for emails every 10 minutes’ (SC1). While consultants acknowledge such pressures, they also put them into perspective, suggesting it is difficult sometimes or on specific projects.

Another antecedent referred to indicates that standards and work cultures are specific to the type of consultancy or business unit. Strategy consulting is perceived as the most intense form of consulting, while strategy groups within larger management consulting firms also demand the most from their consultants:

There are differences within consulting. I am from management and HR consulting. It is a cliché, but I have the feeling that in this community, people have a background in psychology, which makes them more aware of [the importance of] work-life balance. . . . We also have strategy consultants, and they work longer hours. (MC7)

As strategy groups within Big 4 consultancies compete with high-end strategy houses, this might explain their longer hours. But within the field of strategy consulting, there are also differences in the work-life balance culture. The Big 3 are perceived as the most demanding regarding work hours, but some strategy consultancies promote a different culture, and some consultants point at their freedom to choose where to work:

**MC2:** I think the big difference is your own level of control. At Bain or BCG, for instance, they work longer hours. The question is if this influences your work-life balance, because the people I know who work there, do not see it like that. They work more hours than I do, but they do not feel it has a negative effect on their work-life balance. . . . They consciously choose to give up part of their social and private life to work so much. . . . They really like to work.

**Interviewer:** So, you have deliberately chosen for another type of consultancy?

**MC2:** Yes, it was a conscious choice. I looked at all the big strategy houses before I came here [digital strategy boutique], also to know if strategy consulting would be a good choice for me.
These quotes indicate that there are many variations between consultancies and that consultants try to choose what fits them. This adds to the explanation of the rather positive work-life balance appraisals overall, despite the extreme work context.

Project dynamics. For consultants, work-life balance strongly depends on the projects they work on. Project timing and project location are factors mentioned both by strategy and management consultants in Table 4; however, their impact appears different. Hard deadlines and shorter projects are common for strategy consultants. Short projects can be especially intense: ‘Because we have short projects, we work very fast. Three times a day, we check with the whole team what needs to be done’ (SC1). For management consultants, projects tend to last longer, and they often have more relaxed deadlines. What is similar for both groups is that towards the project deadline and client meetings, the pressure increases:

You simply know, the meetings with the boss and the client are the milestones of the project. These are typically busy weeks, and you know that in advance. Thereafter, you often have 1 or 2 weeks to tie up loose ends. These are very relaxed weeks. (SC3)

A distant project location, sometimes even abroad, can also hamper the work-life balance experience: ‘The distance to your work location influences what your work and personal life look like, because the commuting time can be strenuous’ (MC3). Working at more distant project locations and abroad happens most in strategy consulting and is taxing for one’s social life. However, some strategy consultants refocus on the sunny side of working abroad: ‘It is pleasant that when you come back from abroad, you have finished many tasks. It also is a period during which you have the opportunity to finish things that you had wanted to do for a long time’ (SC2). By getting things done, the to-do list gets smaller.

A shared aspect that our interviewees’ report is how their work-life balance varies with the nature of the project. For example, when projects are interesting, MC4 does not have a sense that they are taking private time. Moreover, SC6 indicates how a boring project has the opposite effect (Table 4). Additionally, consultants indicate that unpredictable projects create work-life conflict.

Also similar is how strategy and management consultants experience the influence of project clients. It is the industry culture of clients that determines what consultants consider ‘normal’ working hours during a project: ‘In an earlier assignment, in October, November, December, I had days from 08:00 AM till 08:00 PM. Now it is more like 08:30 AM till 05:30 PM’ (MC5). The quotes in Table 4 on project clients also indicate how management consultants sometimes need to adapt to an 80-hour client working week, while strategy consultants sometimes can slow down a bit, due to a client. In conclusion, projects have a big impact on consultants’ work-life balance experiences, but overall experiences are not framed as too bad, even in strategy consultants’ eyes. They mention what is taxing, then refocus, and then also stress the sunny side of work-life.

Perceptions of work-life balance policies and practices

As many organisational antecedents are perceived differently by strategy and management consultants, we wonder how these consultancies adapt to this difference with their
work-life balance policies and practices. The millennials we spoke to reported how their consulting firms apply both supportive and compensatory work-life balance policies. Moreover, those working at strategy houses also mention some additional policies: a more close management approach, the weekly monitoring of consultants’ health and wellbeing, extra support staff and more abundant fringe benefits and social events (see Table 5).

**Support measures.** All management consultants report that their organisation prioritises work-life balance by putting it on the agenda, for instance, in annual meetings about a year plan (see the first quote in Table 5). At strategy houses, work-life balance is also perceived as a priority: “Work-life balance is an important issue for all strategy consultancies. Consultants are your most important capital, so for them, this is important” (SC5). Consultants also feel the topic of work-life conflict can be addressed: ‘You can always inform your manager if the pressure gets too high. After an intense period, you can always ask for a workload reduction. It is not that you only have to be a star performer, or else lose your job’ (MC6). However, with the higher work demands in strategy consulting, stronger interventions are undertaken by managers, for instance, being sent home (see the second quote in Table 5).

Despite these reported management efforts, consultants still feel it is difficult to act upon the articulated work-life balance priority: ‘There is a gap between what is said [about work-life balance] and how they [management] act on it. I have experienced this contradiction. . . . Then you have to be really strong to improve your work-life balance’ (MC5). In strategy houses, the work-life balance priority is mainly visible in several institutionalised practices to protect workers against themselves: ‘We are all used to working too hard and to belong to the best. So, there are many stops and roadblocks to prevent us from putting too much pressure on ourselves’ (SC3). Such stops and roadblocks aim at damage control and secure the health and productivity of an overly eager human capital force. Strategy consultants report an inclination towards work, more than towards life it seems.

A related work-life balance practice typical for strategy consulting is the frequent monitoring of consultants’ health. Many strategy consultants explain how they have to report weekly how they feel and whether they still have sustainable working hours (see the quote from SC7 in Table 5). The experience is that partners discuss these results frequently, and strategy consultants feel closely managed:

> You need to register how you perceive your work pressure online. Results are discussed every week, and if our management sees patterns, they give feedback. Also, after every project and every 6 months, partners discuss the results (SC5).

At management consulting firms, such work-life balance evaluations tend to occur less frequently, more on an annual or biannual basis, as is common in the corporate world.

Work-life balance training and e-learning are less popular in both settings. Strategy consultants hardly report it. Consultants prefer to reflect with their coach or manager: ‘I think it is fine to read theory about work-life balance, but you have to experience it, and I think having conversations is a better way to discover how it works than reading it from a screen’ (MC2). Reported work-life balance training included topics such as time
management and dealing with various stakeholders within the firm. Support practices in strategy houses place a strong emphasis on managing and monitoring their very eager workforce, whereas support for the management consultants relies more on coaching and training, leaving more initiative to the consultants.
Compensation practices. Extra time off and forms of flexibility are mentioned most as compensation practices in return for long hours, and they are very much appreciated. Consultancies demand work flexibility regarding when and where their employees work, but consultancies also give it back by allowing consultants to carry out domestic tasks or exercising during working hours. It is a compensation strategy very much appreciated by both management and strategy consultants: ‘Someone goes jogging every day and, therefore, arrives at the office at 9.30 instead of 9.00. Fine, nobody minds. . . . Unless there simply is too much work’ (SC1). Management and strategy consultancies also offer downtime after peak periods: ‘Sometimes, if it is very visible that during a certain project they see that you have been very busy and worked overtime a lot, then they will tell you to take it easy and take an extra day off’ (MC7). The project-based nature of consultant work especially allows to ‘take it easy’ between projects, and have long holidays:

Once every 2 years you can take 2 months extra off: . . . It anyway is project-based work, so it does not really matter if you are away, and whether that is for a long time or not, because when you come back, you go into the next project. (SC4)

The same applies to management consultants: ‘[A few years ago] I was away for 3 months, and that was negotiable. It was partly unpaid leave and partly paid leave’ (MC10).

However, part-time work is difficult in this work context, and especially for strategy consultants:

I think it is difficult within our profession, because the client actually always assumes that you work on Fridays, so he also schedules meetings or calls or whatever then. You have to stand strong then to say ‘No, I can’t work then, because I have a day off’. (SC6)

Two management consultants in our sample do report a contract of 4 days a week. Still, both work 40 hours a week or more – almost as much as their full-time colleagues. Part-time work thus illustrates the tension between seeing work-life balance as a priority and being able to act on it, as consultants criticised earlier.

The second set of compensation practices are fringe benefits and forms of non-monetary compensation like social events and extra support staff. The last two are mentioned most by strategy consultants, and their fringe benefits are also more abundant. Basic fringe benefits include lease cars, laptops, mobile phones, healthy vending machines, fitness subscriptions, and sports facilities at work, practices rather common in the corporate world. The high intensity of social events at work is more specific to consultancies. As consultants often work at their client’s office, they do not see their colleagues on a regular basis. Social events at work and company outings such as skiing trips stimulate bonding (see the quote from SC3 in Table 5). Management consultants report the same: ‘Many social activities are being organised, . . . through which you build good relationships with your colleagues. . . . We went on a skiing trip; we often have drinks, parties’ (MC8). This approach integrates life elements into the work sphere. By making the hours spent at work more fulfilling, consultancies try to decrease the perception of work-life conflict. This seems to work for consultants: ‘I would rather count a weekend skiing trip with work more as life than as work. Those are things you get in return’ (SC3).
Additionally, many of the surveyed strategy consultants report that they have extensive support staff (i.e. for research questions, IT issues, PowerPoint) to which certain work-related tasks can be outsourced: ‘There is a certain department within our [SC] firm that helps to find information. And that really helps to make sure you do not have to do it yourself and thus have to spend less time on it’ (SC1). Strategy firms even encourage consultants to outsource some domestic activities – such as cleaning, washing and cooking – so that consultants can spend more time on their work, without losing their quality time at home (i.e. only losing the home tasks they might not enjoy). One interviewee who has been employed at a strategy consulting firm for 1 year and previously worked for a management consulting firm for 2 years illustrates how she appreciates the more generous compensation practices at strategy houses:

I have the feeling here that you have to do a lot for it, but you really are in a position in which you are being supported in all kinds of ways . . . . At [a Big 4 consulting firm], you had to work many more hours than an average person in the corporate world, but if you, so to speak, wanted to hand in a receipt declaration for something, ten questions were asked about it. (SC11)

Strategy consultants also express how they appreciate that they can book luxurious hotels, eat at high-quality restaurants, and make unlimited phone calls. Overall, strategy and management consultants share an appreciation for most of the work-life balance policies and practices offered to them, and especially those tailored to their situation.

Discussion

Main results and theoretical contributions

We aimed to explore how young professionals perceive their work-life balance and the available work-life balance policies in an extreme work context. Our comparative analysis of work-life balance perceptions indicates that strategy consultants’ higher performance expectations and longer working hours result in more negative appraisals of work-life balance in line with common assumptions (Reindl, 2013). However, overall, positive appraisals still dominate, which is surprising. As Figure 2 summarises, several context-specific work-life balance policies and practices moderate the perception of work-life balance, and occupational ideologies also appear influential.

Our study makes two contributions to the literature on work-life balance. First, we detail the perceived impact of organisational context on the individual work-life balance experience, as called for by Noury et al. (2017), Blagoev et al. (2018) and Eikhof et al. (2007). Figure 2 outlines how work-life balance perceptions are related to organisational antecedents like project work, client expectations and performance standards, and how these antecedents vary with context. In the more extreme work context of strategy houses, consultants appraise their work-life balance negatively more often and more firmly, due to higher firm expectations, and projects often being executed in international settings. The expected availability and flexibility also differ. At the same time these high-performance norms seem to increase workers’ tolerance of what they see as acceptable work-life balance.
What is similar for management and strategy consultants is that projects perceived as boring add to the work pressure, whereas those viewed as interesting alleviate the experience of conflict. Client demands also play a role for both. If the client works long hours, like in the banking industry (Brödner, 2008; Michel, 2011), consultants adapt. Likewise, recent ICT developments, flexible working arrangements and constant availability put pressure on both sets of consultants. Contextual factors might work substantially different on the work-life balance experience, for instance when the occupational setting lacks project work.

We also show how organisational work-life balance policies are adapted to the occupational context. As indicated by the lowest box in Figure 2, strategy houses monitor their consultants’ health weekly to avoid stress-related breakdowns. Furthermore, they offer domestic services, extensive support staff and facilities to outsource parts of their projects. Management consulting firms generally do not offer these policies, which are more well perceived in the strategy setting, and more so than traditional work-life balance policies such as health or training programmes (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Grawitch et al., 2010; Kaiser et al., 2011; Morrell and Simonetto, 1999). Coaching, mentoring and direct manager support is appreciated in both settings, and thus remains relevant in a high-performance context (cf. Peper et al., 2011; Reindl, 2013). Social events and fringe benefits are appreciated as well but appear more abundant at strategy houses. We, therefore, conclude that the work-life balance policies that are tailored to a more extreme work context are well perceived, answer demand, and can moderate the overall work-life balance experience. At the same time, common policies do not necessarily fit the extreme context, and some are experienced as less effective.

The specifics of their extreme work context have not previously been linked in such detail to consultants’ perception of work-life balance (cf. Chasserio and Legault, 2010; Costas, 2013; Kaiser et al., 2010, 2011; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016; Reindl, 2013). For better explaining perceptions in future work-life balance models, industry specific performance norms, competitive position and peer pressure need to be better included. Our findings indicate their key influence when
studying work-life balance experiences in high performance sectors. Consultants, like other employees in high performance contexts, get socialized in how they experience work-life balance. Work-life balance perceptions appear to be more socially constructed than commonly presumed.

Our second theoretical contribution is based on our observation that work-life balance policies and practices in the extreme context of consultancy work have more ambivalent outcomes than most work-life balance literature assumes. Indeed, strategy houses support work-life balance demands by monitoring consultants’ health and making work-life balance an acceptable topic to discuss with peers and managers. Moreover, by providing extra resources to reduce workload through task delegation, they support employees’ attempts to alleviate their workload. These additional support and compensation policies and practices are valued in strategy houses (as is expected based on work-life balance literature); however, they still go hand in hand with an increased perception of overworking. This indicates that the overall impact of the additional work-life balance policies and practices remains limited. The literature currently attributes such lack of impact on insufficient use of work-life balance policies, individuals’ fear of stigma, negative career consequences and the absence of managerial support (Kaiser et al., 2010; Litrico et al., 2011; Peper et al., 2011). These explanations are not particularly applicable to our context, as the millennials we spoke to experience supportive management and appreciate many of the organisational policies and practices.

One explanation for this ambiguous result at strategy houses could be the effect of normative control. While the policies initially moderate the perception of work-life balance towards the positive, in strategy houses the many social events, dinners at work and outsourcing of domestic tasks will also make separation strategies more difficult as an individual coping approach (Barley et al., 2011; Currie and Eveline, 2011; Roberts, 2007). Moreover, when integrative strategies initially reduce the perception of work-life conflict, it still means that life is ‘written out’ (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000: 1151). While our respondents feel that work-life balance is a priority, they also experience how difficult it is to act on this priority in their work context. Consequently, the private sphere becomes smaller by substituting it with work-life through creating a community and friendship culture at work and raising the expectations to engage in this community culture. In other high performing industries with similar integration policies (i.e. banking), working weeks of up to 120 hours have been reported, but many professionals were subsequently overworked (Alvesson and Einola, 2018; Michel, 2011). Practices such as performing private tasks at work, offering first-class flights, hotels and restaurants, and the suggestion that you belong to ‘the best’ (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006: 198) all encourage work-related commitments. This indicates how such support practices also imply normative control and, in the end, can harm perceived work-life balance. Normative control mechanisms are an important element to consider when modelling work-life balance mechanisms. They are part of a social context with work related expectations that vary greatly across occupations, differently influencing work-life balance perceptions as observed in our study for management and strategy consultants.

A second explanation more based on our data is that perceptions become ambiguous due to normalisation tactics. Practices of normalising extreme work demands in consulting have been indicated before by Kärreman and Alvesson (2009). Normalisation is also
Normalisation aims to construct a more positive insider judgement about work than outsiders would commit to. In our quotes, we find a discrepancy between what insiders and outsiders perceive normal working hours (MC10, first quote in Table 4: 60–80 hours is typical in this environment). Additionally, other quotes show recalibration (SC12: 60 hours is doable, 70 becomes too much) and refocussing (SC2: you can finish a lot of work when being abroad) and reframing (MC4: the project is so interesting, it changes the perception of overworking). Such normalisation tactics are called occupational ideologies in the dirty work literature (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), and they have previously been highlighted by quotes from junior consultants and their managers when discussing their demanding leadership (cf. Bouwmeester and Kok, 2018). This poses the question of the extent to which the extreme work context of consulting is deep down perceived as somewhat dirty by consultants who need a positive occupational ideology to protect their identity and self-esteem.

Normative control and occupational ideologies are both part of the social setting in which workers experience their work-life balance, and make this experience socially constructed. When modelling work-life balance, these social elements are thus important context factors to consider when explaining individual work-life balance perceptions, especially in extreme work contexts (see also Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016). Both normative control and normalisation can push employees beyond their own limits by first positively influencing perceptions, while also creating ambivalence in perceptions as soon as employees start experiencing serious difficulties to keep up with the normalised but extreme occupational demands.

Limitations and further research

Longitudinal research could tap into the question of when consultants, bankers or other high performing professionals start to experience the ambivalence of integration strategies (Gill, 2015; Michel, 2011; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; O’Mahoney, 2007), why, or for how long, they embrace such a working life (Lupu and Empson, 2015; Muhr et al., 2013) and what type of workers do so, given the high turnover rates in consulting (Morrell and Simonetto, 1999). For example, it would be interesting to explore whether they would continue when they start a family. Our study is limited by its focus on early career consultants below the age of 35. Still, our age group covers most employees at the big consultancies we have studied. Due to their up-or-out policies the average age of their consultants is around 30. Moreover, the consultancy sector is a good setting to study how this new generation, which has started to dominate our economy, experiences work-life balance policies and practices in an extreme work context.

Our study has been qualitative, with a focus on millennials in the context of consultancy. However, the pattern we find, that when industries put higher work pressures on their employees, they also respond with more, and more intense work-life balance policies, might be generalisable across other high-pressure industries. If not in a descriptive sense, then at least as a potential practice with a moderating impact. Future research could explore the relationship between organisational antecedents and tailored work-life balance policies in other high performing industries like professional sports, arts or
academia to study how work-life balance perceptions relate to their industry-dependent performance cultures.

To enable better monitoring and investigation of the effects of intensive work regimes on employee health, wellbeing and work-life balance in knowledge-intensive work, we recommend that future studies utilise quantitative designs, based on well-defined constructs to measure stress levels and perceptions of overworking, and to better define relevant context-specific influences like leadership styles, but also to include social context factors like occupational ideologies and practices of normative control. We believe there is a need to better conceptualize how these social factors influence work-life balance perceptions. At the same time, we suggest that researchers also continue conducting qualitative studies, as perceptions, subjectivity and sensemaking are central in work-life balance experiences. Subjectivity has an important impact, as projects that were perceived as boring increased work-life conflict in our study. When employees were quite engaged, the opposite generally happened. Additionally, impact of engagement and calling might be relevant to study in high-performance contexts such as professional sports, arts, architecture and academia. To better explore how the process of socially constructing norms, industry expectations and occupational ideologies develops, and how they influence individual perceptions, studying occupational discourse might help to develop a better understanding, next to studying the socialization process of new recruits.

The Dutch context of our study is another limitation since national policies in The Netherlands are relatively supportive of part-time work. Still, part-time work did not seem to be an option in strategy houses, and not a very effective solution in management consultancies. As national work-life policies and cultures substantially differ throughout Europe – and even more globally – the impact of national culture and legislation on work-life balance policies and practices will be substantial between the country divisions of big international firms. Future studies could explore such cross-country differences.

Conclusion

Based on our comparative study into work-life balance policies in the high-performance context of management and strategy consulting, we conclude that strategy consultants, who experience the highest work pressures, also report work-life balance policies that go beyond traditional practices such as training, coaching and health programmes. Therefore, work-life balance policies are adapted to this extreme context with 60-hour working weeks on average. In response, strategy houses monitor their consultants’ work-life balance experience weekly, provide options to outsource parts of the work and sometimes use directive forms of management to send people home. Secondly, we conclude that such additional policies are appreciated. We do not even find substantial differences in positive perceptions of work-life balance between strategy and management consultants, which is surprising. Still, the additional work-life balance policies cannot fully mitigate the increasing negative experiences that come with stressful organisational antecedents in strategy houses (i.e. the higher performance demands and more international projects with challenging deadlines). In both contexts, such negative experiences are framed as exceptions, and the average working weeks of 50 or 60 hours are recalibrated as being the new normal. Such normalisation is part of an occupational ideology in consulting and helps explain the ambiguity in perceptions.
Based on the experiences reported in strategy houses where the work pressures are most extreme, we recommend that other high-performance sectors with 60 hour working weeks or more, can learn from practices like monitoring work-life balance experiences weekly, addressing questions about the sustainability of work hours as well as feelings of well-being and health. If employees engage in more intense work regimes, health risks increase, and more frequent monitoring becomes vital to readjust workloads when needed. Additionally, the extensive support staff in strategy houses is appreciated, and we recommend that other high-performance sectors look into this measure. If employees like what they do, 60 hours does not feel so much compared to when they have to conduct more repetitive or boring tasks (i.e. editing, polishing a PowerPoint, doing inquiries, making appointments. etc.). Therefore, this compensation practice could have multiple positive impacts when it leads to a reduction in the time spent working. Still, the impact of such practices should not be overestimated, and they might even have the unintended consequence of shifting the balance towards work instead of life, as that seems a hidden agenda behind mechanisms of normative control and normalisation.

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