

Women and their Work–Life Balance in German IT Consulting

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ABSTRACT

Germany's current population pyramid – as well as certain gender aspects – has led to a call for increasing numbers of working women in many industrial sectors. However, IT consultancies still find it difficult to adequately exploit highly qualified women's potential when recruiting and bonding them. We believe that this originates from deficits in the perceived work–life balance of female consultants. Therefore, on the basis of an empirical study carried out with the aid of online interviews and following expert phone interviews, the current state of work–life balance in German IT consultancies is looked at in this paper. We focus on the situation of female IT consultants and show that the consulting sector can improve the work–life balance of female IT consultants by means of additional efforts, and also by raising the attractiveness of this sector for entrants.

Author Keywords

Work-Life Balance; IT Consulting; Gender; Professional Service Firm; Knowledge Workers; War for Talent.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.6.1. Project and People Management. K.7.2. Organizations. H.1.2. User/Machine Systems. J.1. Administrative Data Processing. K.4.1. Public Policy Issues.

MOTIVATION

Consulting services that aim to improve a company's use of information processing (IP) and information technology (IT) is termed IT consulting [15]. In the past, a “war for talent” was waged in the consulting sector. Moreover, demographic changes will make the recruitment and the retention of highly qualified employees a challenge for

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consulting companies in the future, too. The compatibility of working life and private life – otherwise known as the work–life balance (WLB)¹ – generally has a key role [8], and is also seen as relevant by the consulting companies [19].

Despite the fact that the majority of the German population is female (51% at the end of 2009 [20]), women are clearly underrepresented in IT jobs. The percentage of women working in the information and communication sector – to which, according to the Statistische Bundesamt, telecommunication, information technology and media belong – was 35% [20]. Additionally, in fields of study relevant to IT jobs, only low numbers of women can be seen; for example, the percentage of women in the field of computer science has been under 20% for many years now [3]. Thus IT professions belong to a number of other professions being confronted with gender-specific differences.

Empirical examinations have until now focused either on the topic of WLB without explicit reference to IT consulting (e.g. [12, 5]), or on the area of consulting without or with only a slight reference to this topic (e.g. [10, 9]). By connecting both topic areas we – by means of the study carried out – follow the central research question: whether the potential of available highly qualified female employees could be tapped better for the IT consulting sector in the future by applying adequate WLB measures.

The focus on female consultants relies on the assumption that the connectivity of family and children with the profession of the women is much more demanding due to ever-present classical role models (cf. [11]). In addition, the urgency to connect both things successfully becomes more and more important with the increasing age of female consultants due to biological reasons, such as whether or not they want to have children. As the consulting job implies a very high degree of professional strain, effective concepts for a good WLB are necessary to counteract a

¹ Concerning the discussion about different definitions of WLB, we refer to [7] [17] and [21].

small percentage of women and a high fluctuation [8] in the German consulting sector. Our work can also be seen in the context of the current discussion in Germany to enforce a quota of women in management positions by law. This would require knowing in more detail the requirements of women in terms of work-life balance measures.

It is one objective of this paper, to make our empirical results, which have so far only been published in German language [16], available to a wider, English-speaking audience, as problems of WLB are relevant in other developed countries, too, and the “war for talent” is an international phenomenon [6,7,17,23].

After presenting the starting point, this article now follows an overview of the data and methodical procedures of the study. In “Results” important findings of the study are presented, followed by a discussion of the results and conclusions. After discussing “Limitations and Future Work” the section “Summary and Outlook” summarizes main results and practical implications.

DATA AND METHOD

The basis of this work is the study “Work-life balance of women in IT consulting (WoBaFIT)”, which we carried out between September 2010 and April 2011 [16]. Results are based on a triangulated approach with online-questionnaires and expert interviews, thus combining quantitative and qualitative methods [22] to explore a research field that has not received much attention so far. The persons of interest were female IT consultants, as well as those responsible for human resources in IT consultancies. Descriptive data analysis methods were applied to the data from the online-questionnaires.

The collection of the data was based on a two-stage procedure. Firstly, online and phone interviews were carried out, with snowball sampling being used to gain participants for the study. Experts’ existing contacts in the consulting scene were used, and further participants were found via their contacts and recommendations in the network. We were therefore able to reach 331 persons, of which 268 agreed to participate in the online study. As only complete questionnaires could be accepted, a total of 170 (155 female consultants and 15 human resources managers) were used for the evaluation. A subset of 74 questionnaires came from female IT consultants (as opposed to other fields of consulting). Moreover, 22 consultants (with 10 of them coming from IT consulting) and 8 human resources managers agreed to take part in a telephone interview. The 74 questionnaires together with the 10 telephone interviews form the basis of our analysis with regard to IT consulting in the following sections.

The online questionnaire was designed with reference to other comparable studies (cf. [12, 5]), and contained questions dealing with topics such as WLB, career, and working conditions. With the help of 20 corresponding questions, the perceptions of the two target groups were

collected and confronted. The consultants were asked a total of 32 questions, while HR managers were asked 24. These were predominantly closed questions and opinion questions in multiple choice form.

The results of the online interviews were used to design the guidelines for the expert interviews, as some facts could only be unsatisfactorily examined by means of standardized questions or new questions arose from the results of the online interviews. The phone interviews with the experts were transferred into transcripts and coded. The application of an interview guideline made it possible to systematically evaluate and compare the data. The results were reprocessed with the aid of a structural content analysis [14]. For reasons of space, in the following sections we concentrate on the point of view of female IT consultants.

RESULTS

What is work-life balance?

The term WLB was interpreted very broadly (cf. Figure 1) by the female IT consultants. In the online study, the areas relationship and profession were cited equally and together with the aspect health were „definitely” seen as part of the topic area WLB. The answers “friends”, “family/children”, “hobbies” and “sports” also met with high approval. Travelling, further professional training and cultural activities were also connected to WLB, but 20% of the interviewees did not see them as being a part of their WLB.

Community service is the only aspect which is not seen as part of the participants’ WLB. In addition, the last four aspects were evaluated ambivalently. Here, the answers range from “yes, definitely” to “not at all”.

In the guided interviews we can see that WLB is described differently by every individual consultant, and that every person has individual and differing emphases. Terms cited relatively often in relation to WLB were “feeling of well-being”, “inner contentment” and “balance”. Particular emphasis was placed on the fact that the importance of the different areas in a WLB vary over time and in the course of a consulting career.

In the beginning, family/children is deemed less important, especially for young IT consultants working in this field for only a few months or a few years. But after some years of working life, the desire for family and children becomes stronger; hence this area becomes more important in the field of WLB. According to older IT consultants, this aspect then loses its importance when their children have become more independent and leave their parents’ home. After this, areas such as hobbies, culture and travelling gain increasing interest.

Striving for and realization of work-life-balance

To determine the potential of WLB measures for the recruitment of women and for the bonding of female IT consultants we asked, whether IT consultants actively

Are the following aspects part of work-life balance from your point of view?

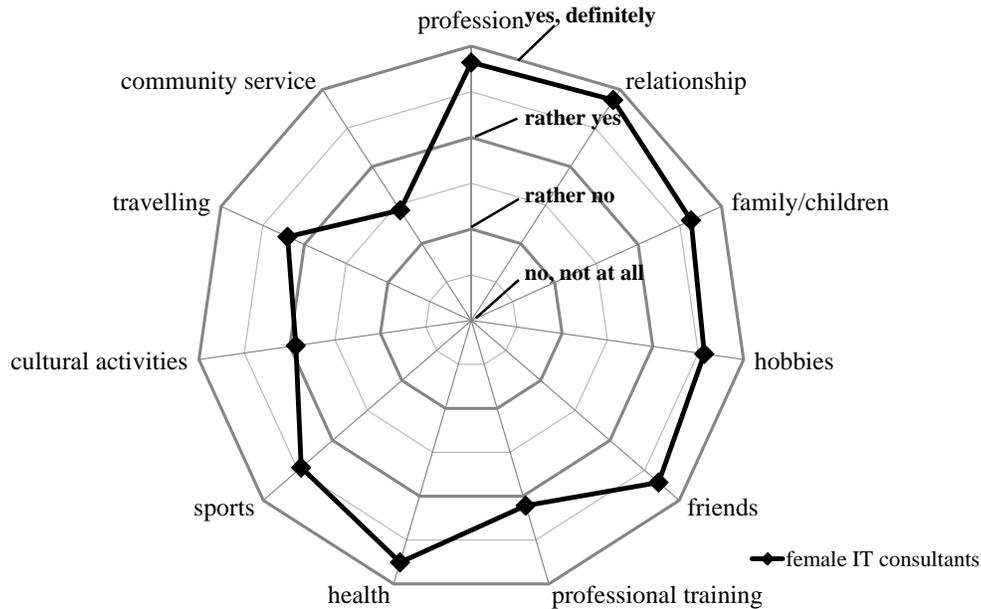


Figure 1: Topic areas cited as being part of female IT consultants’ work–life balance.

strive for a balance between their professional and private life, and whether their profession makes the realization of a private WLB possible at all (cf. Table 1). A total of 95% of the IT consultants asked said that they actively strive for a balance between their professional and private life. However, 59% also said that their profession does not really enable them to realize a private WLB. Only 4% said that the balance strived for is made possible by their profession, while a further 4% do not strive for any active WLB.

Do you actively aim for a balance between your professional and private life?	Does your profession make the realization of your personal work–life balance possible?					Sum
	No information	Yes, of course	Somewhat	Not really	Total	
No information	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Yes, of course	0%	4%	26%	31%	4%	65%
Somewhat	0%	0%	8%	20%	1%	30%
Not really	0%	1%	0%	3%	0%	4%
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	0%	5%	35%	54%	5%	100%

Table 1. Striving for and realization of work-life balance among female IT consultants (minimal rounding errors).

Several reasons were mentioned in the interviews as to why the consulting profession does not make a personal WLB realistic. An active WLB is often connected to regular activities during the week (e.g. family life, sports, meeting friends, etc.). Due to the predominantly project-oriented work at the customer’s site, these private things are often only possible on weekends, which is seen as limiting for the realization of a WLB. Furthermore, the readiness to enable flexible overtime hours at short notice also makes the projectability of an active private WLB difficult. As a result, the consulting profession generally offers rather bad WLB conditions.

What are the aims of work–life balance measures?

From the point of view of IT consultants, the organization of working time should be an important aim of WLB measures (cf. Figure 2). This could be the establishment of flexible working time models, the flexibility to change between different working time models or the possibility to flexibly exit from working for a short time. Further aims are related to topics like health, support and motivation, as well as an increase in work satisfaction. However, a general reduction of working time, the reduction of overtime hours, the improvement of relationships with colleagues and superiors, and the reduction of the general workload are not named as aims for WLB measures.

Objectives of Work-Life Balance Measures



Figure 2: Objectives of work-life balance measures from the point of view of female IT consultants.

How would IT consultants prefer to spread their time?

An important starting point for the organization of WLB measures is the spreading of available time. IT consultants were asked how they would like to spread their time to different areas. Here it can clearly be seen that the area “profession” is the only one for which the consultants would like to spend less time than they actually do (cf. Figure 3), whereas they would like to have more time for all the other areas (sports, relationship, friends, hobbies, health, family/children) – or at least the same time (travelling, culture, community service and further professional training).

In addition, the desire to reduce the time they currently spend on working is confirmed by the interviews. In these, we asked the consultants about their level of satisfaction with their current WLB. Those consultants that were clearly unsatisfied said that this feeling is due to “long working days” and “long commutes to work”, so that things like friends and hobbies become downgraded. Not a single

consultant judged their current situation as optimal. Other reasons given for the wish to spend more time with other things were the negative consequences or experiences already experienced with regards to health problems, problems with one’s partner and the estrangement of friends.

Are measures for a work-life balance offered to you?

We also looked at how respondents judged the range of work-life balance measures offered by companies (cf. Figure 4). Only flexibility in the place of work, flexibility and the organization of working time and salary components were seen as appropriate or better by more than 50% of female IT consultants. Measures concerning so-called supporting services (e.g. daily shopping or laundry services), the gender-related education of managers and human resources development, and information and communication about WLB and health were seen as inadequate by more than 60% of the interviewees.

How would you like to spread your time in these areas?

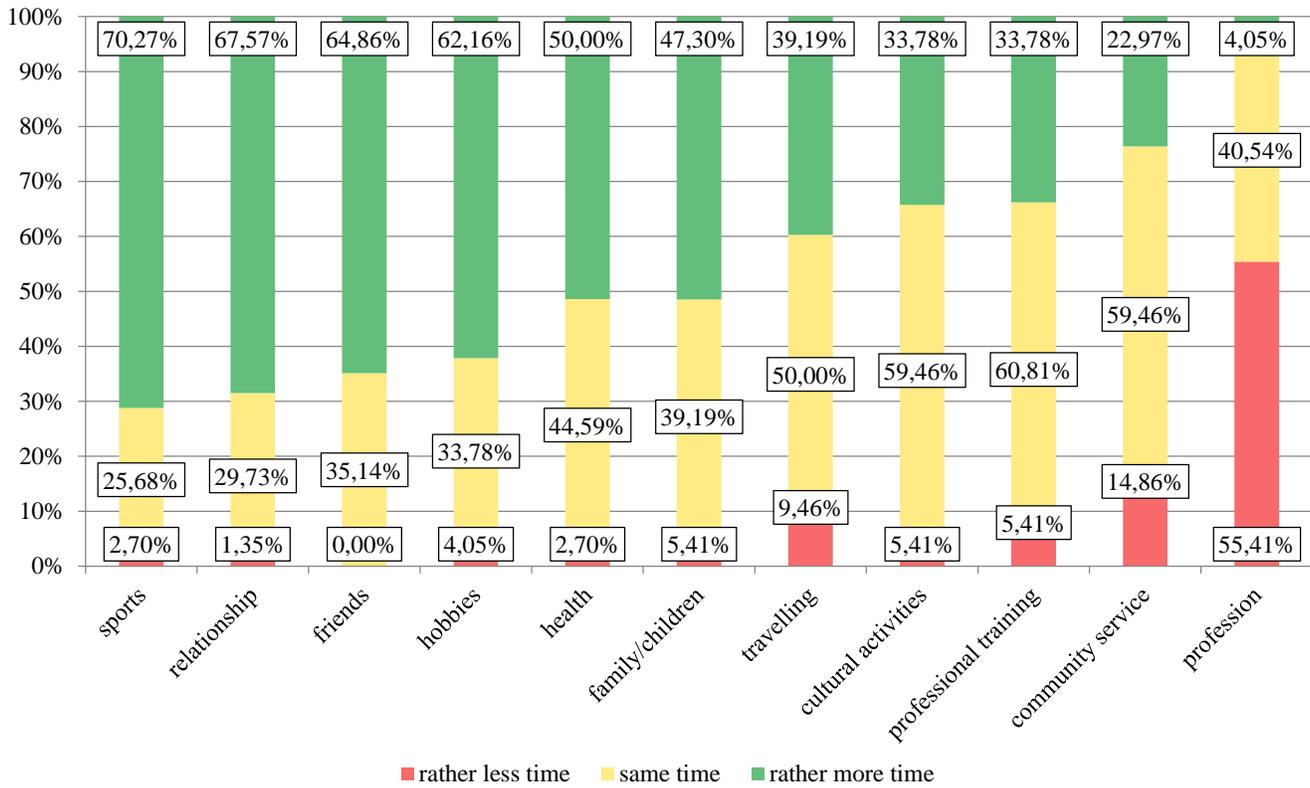


Figure 3: The ways in which IT consultants would spread their time differently.

How do you perceive the range of work-life balance measures offered by your company in the following areas?

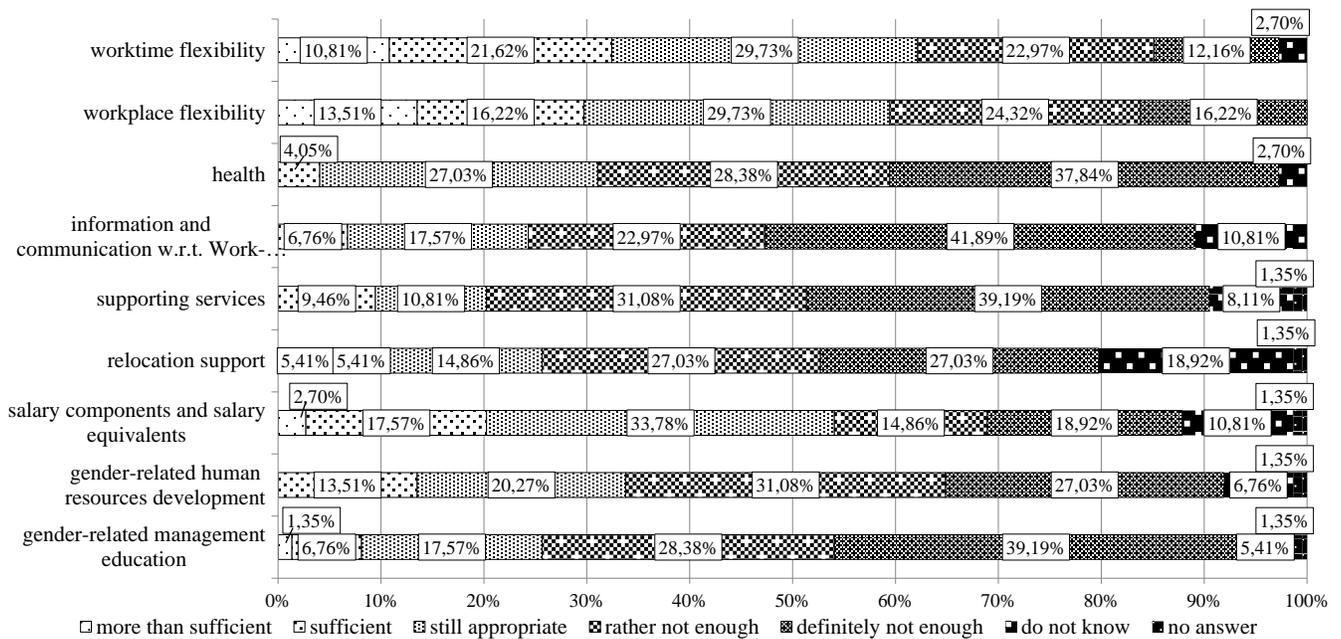


Figure 4: How female IT consultants see the range of work-life-balance measures offered by their companies.

When we asked in the interviews which WLB measures are offered by the employers we received a mixed picture. On the one hand, some IT consultants said that a widespread range of measures was available to the employees, but only partial offers are made when explicitly requested by the employees. However, many employees do not know that WLB measures were even available – and so they never ask for them. On the other hand, half of the IT consultants said that no official offers for WLB exist.

How should the offers be further developed?

Female IT consultants would like to have more measures to improve their WLB (cf. Figure 5). According to more than 80%, organization and flexibility in relation to working time and working place is seen as either important or very

important, as well as the area of gender-related manager education (approx. 80%) and HR development (approx. 75%). The smallest need was expressed for relocation support, with less than 30% thinking that an extension is important, while 12% did not think it was important at all.

In addition to these figures, the desire for “more flexibility” was expressed often in the interviews. The excessive emphasis on “financial and material values in salary” was seen as negative in comparison to the consideration of “weak factors”, which were seen as an important field of development. Furthermore, a change of culture was seen generally as an important factor in IT consulting for upgrading the importance of WLB measures.

To what extent would you support the introduction or extension of work-life balance measures in the following areas?

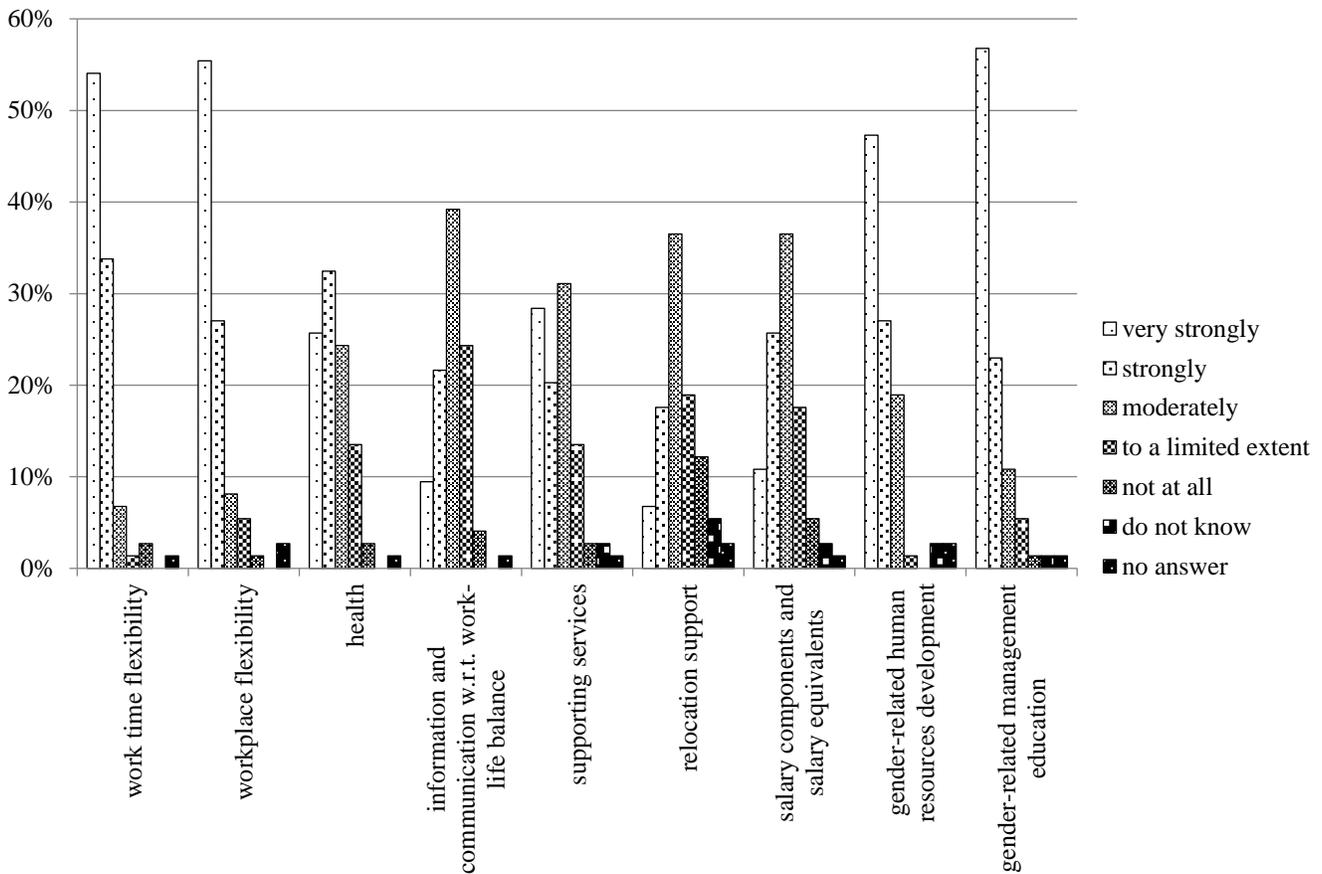


Figure 5: How female IT consultants believe offers for work-life balance measures in companies should be further developed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The “war for talent” provides opportunities for the well-qualified workforce. Since there is a shortage of skilled workers, their position is strengthened in relation to employers. Consequently, knowledge workers can basically place demands on their work environment. To render these

demands tangible for female IT-consultants was a primary goal of our study.

Female IT consultants summarize a number of life fields under the term WLB (cf. Figure 1). WLB is described as a system where the aim is to gain satisfaction in the fields involved, and where no field is neglected or subordinated to another. Indeed it is very clear that a metaphorical balance

(equal weight) between working life and private life is only strived for by a small number of female IT consultants. In fact, individual situations are cited which may change during one's lifetime.

It is quite clear why the first priority among WLB measures has been the establishment of flexible work time models (cf. Figure 2), as the current distribution of work time among IT consultants is very unbalanced (cf. Figure 3). It dominates the occupancy of the IT consultants massively, which is quite in line with the findings of others in the literature (cf. [2],[6]). It should be noted that working longer hours than preferred can have a significant negative impact on well-being [23], even though the health and well-being of the workforce has important economic implications [4].

Some possible starting points to improve the situation from the point of view of IT consultants are offers concerning the organization and flexibility of work time and the workplace (cf. Figure 5). According to female IT consultants, consulting companies in these fields still have the potential for change, although the efforts made up until now are seen as insufficient (cf. Figure 4). All in all it has to be said that all fields of WLB measures in their current state are perceived as underdeveloped and it can be questioned whether the profession has sufficiently established WLB at all (cf. Table 1).

If we look at the wishes of the female IT consultants, several already existing possibilities to organize work time and the workplace have proved to be usable. With the help of work-time accounts (balance sheets), temporal part-time working with differing work hours or long-term exits (sabbaticals), long-term time potentials could be established, so that spare time could then be used for other fields of life. One possibility for short-term needs could be the rectification of the working day, which means that the employees do not have to work during a fixed period of time but in individual blocks. In order to achieve this, it would be necessary to have a more flexible concept of what constitutes the "workplace". For some jobs it is not necessary for the consultant to be personally within the company, but can instead establish themselves in a home office or even telework. In general, the concept of "virtual consulting" could be explored and implemented, trying - e. g. by using IT to reduce attendance times or the need for on-site IT consultants.

To remain attractive for women in the long term, consultancies should keep new career models in mind so as to encourage individual development without necessitating longer working hours, journeys or long-term absences. This would result in the knowledge of female IT consultants being maintained in the company over the long term.

As a result of our study, we formulate the following theses:

1. For female IT consultants, striking a WLB mainly means the compatibility of job and family.
2. The current role of an IT consultant makes an active implementation of WLB impossible.
3. The employer plays an important role in developing a personal WLB for female IT consultants. However, the WLB measures offered by consulting companies at the moment are not sufficient to make this possible. Consequently, the potential of well-qualified women is not yet fully recognised and deployed in the consulting sector today.
4. Clearly, the current and future demographic situation will make it more and more difficult (particularly for small and medium-sized consulting companies without a brand name) to employ the personnel they require. The extension of WLB measures may support the recruitment of highly qualified women for IT consulting and enforce their ties to the company. For this reason, the topic should be prioritized more by the consulting management.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND FUTURE WORK

In our view, well-trained woman should be recruited and promoted by consulting companies more than is the case today. As pointed out in our study, this would require solving some of the most pressing WLB issues that women in consulting experience.

Clearly, WLB is not a topic that concerns only women. The changing roles in family life suggest that more and more men will make use of WLB measures, but this was not the focus of our study. We have not looked at differences with male consultants. As such, further studies will also need to look at how male IT consultants' ideas differ in comparison to their female colleagues. We plan to look at the situation of male consultants in future research. To our knowledge, until now no such comparative analysis exists with regard to IT-consulting.

Moreover, our empirical basis is female consultants in Germany. Although, issues of WLB are of international relevance, the situation can differ in detail, when one looks at consulting companies in other developed societies. Consequently, it would be useful to repeat the survey in other countries and compare the results with our findings.

Finally, older workers represent another underrated pool of skilled workers that could be recruited and deployed more intensively by the HR departments of consultancies. Again, measures of work-life balance will play an important role to leverage existing opportunities here. This offers another interesting field of research with immediate practical implications.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

This article looks at the current situation of female IT consultants in the context of their WLB. On the basis of online and phone interviews, it can be shown that female IT consultants are not satisfied with their WLB, and their desire to increase their scope in terms of work time and the workplace could be a first starting point for consulting

companies to establish better basic conditions for women in this sector. In comparison to other works (cf. e. g. [8, 19]), the extant general findings are confirmed; however, our study offers an additional benefit, as it is concretely based on empirical data and only refers to IT consulting.

In light of the results, one can say that consulting companies have until recently obviously not realized their female consultants' requests for better WLB measures. One reason (from the point of view of the female IT consultants) is a lack of sensibility among superiors, as well as a lack of information and communication concerning this topic (cf. Figure 4). In a further analysis, the position of the employers should be looked at to understand why.

In relation to the findings, it makes sense to question the current practices around the organization of work time and the workplace of consultants, and thus to develop more flexible approaches for consulting services. The possibilities to "virtualize" consulting should be elaborated so as to provide services independently from time and place, with the innovative use of information techniques potentially playing a key role. Existing structures and procedures should be reviewed to take into account the necessary flexibility already at the beginning of the project planning. Certain project tasks could then be planned and defined as part-time jobs.

In order to give a basis to these approaches, communication should lie at the very centre of a consulting company. Management (e.g. those responsible for HR) and consultants should start an intensive dialogue to consider the need for a better WLB in the profession. The wish to include the topic into personnel and manager development (cf. Figure 5) highlights the fact that such an exchange does not take place in the way at present (from the point of view of female IT consultants).

As a result of a better realization of the wish for more WLB, active consultants could not only be bonded tighter to the company and be convinced to stay longer in the company, but the appearance of consulting companies and the attractiveness of the profession for highly qualified women and men would be improved on the whole. Some consulting companies are aware of the relevance and the potential of WLB, and new ideas are being developed on the ways to broaden WLB concepts in consulting companies (cf. [19]). These should be looked at critically, be further developed and completed with reference to the consulting sector or adapted to individual companies.

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