Work Life ~~Balance~~ Quality

*How young professionals manage work and life
in the consulting industry*

by

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Abstract

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Purpose   The purpose of this study is to investigate how young professionals experience the phenomenon of work life balance (WLB) in the consulting industry and to explore how the differences in experience can be accounted for.

Relevance   Despite the widespread belief that consultants have a poor WLB, a great many newly graduates feel attracted to the consulting job. However, the literature claims that the young generation strives for a healthy WLB. By investigating on how these two contrasting facts can be linked, we wish to minimize the discrepancy in the literature and draw out implications for the Big Four consulting firms which heavily rely on the labor of young professionals.

Methodology   We approached this qualitative research with an interpretive paradigm and conducted eleven interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of how young professionals relate to the WLB phenomenon. In addition to the hermeneutic approach, we took a critical stance by going beyond the literature on WLB and to account for the differences in experience.

Findings   The results suggest that the experience of WLB differs from individual to individual. However, we found four distinct orientations towards the experience of the WLB phenomenon within the group of young consultants. The peculiarity of the orientations is shaped by the young consultants' personalities, level of previous work experience and the degree of sensitivity towards forces from the organizational context. Moreover, this study supports the necessity of re-conceptualizing WLB given the misleading implication of a 50:50 time, involvement and satisfaction distribution between work and life.

Keywords   Work life balance, management consulting, professionals, identity, boundary management, knowledge intensive firms

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Abbreviations

HR	Human resources
KIF	Knowledge intensive firm
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSF	Professional service firm
WLB	Work life balance

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1   Introduction

- There is no work life balance in the consulting industry - A discussion arose when one of our study colleagues questioned the attractiveness of the consulting job during a guest lecture in our management consulting class. The guest lecturer, who joined the consulting business right after his studies and worked his way up to become a partner, elaborated on his intense work schedule. The work intensity highlighted by him corresponded with our perception and the experiences of our friends who just started working as consultants for the Big Four companies. According to them, the average work schedule easily fills 60 hours and holidays are a rarity. Hence, we were surprised that our study colleague associated the term work life balance (WLB) with the consulting job. We in particular believed that a WLB is even more difficult to reach for young professionals at the beginning of their career, given the fact that they have to prove their abilities and establish a reputation. However, the consulting industry is still attracting many newly graduates despite its demanding reputation. This was the starting point for our research project and throughout the process, we discovered valuable insights accounting for the WLB experience of young professionals, which challenge the literature and our assumptions.

1.1   Background

At present, WLB receives a lot of attention from scholars and organizations. A recent study identified managing WLB as one of the five key human resources (HR) challenges European companies have to cope with nowadays (European Association for Personnel Management, 2014). In particular large consultancies find themselves in the midst of the current trend, and pick WLB out as a central theme and actively promote it on their corporate websites (Deloitte, 2015; KPMG, 2015). The consulting firm, as a knowledge intensive firm (KIF), represents the work environment of a knowledge worker whose knowledge constitutes the company's main asset (Alvesson, 2004). Furthermore, according to Alvesson (2004), this type of employee can be described as autonomous whose work is highly intensive. Therefore, the public's perception is that consultants have difficulties in drawing a clear line between the work and life domains (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Taking the technology development into account, mobile devices facilitate a constant connectivity shifting the workspace from the office to anywhere (Davis, 2013). With the recent advancement in technology and the demanding

work, a gradual shift in the boundary between work and life is noticeable (Campbell Clark, 2000), raising the relevance for the concept of WLB (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Despite this work situation, many young professionals feel attracted to the consulting industry as pointed out by Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011), due to the challenging, ambitious and flexible work environment offering many possibilities for a newly graduate. Another aspect, which attracts the young professionals to work in this industry, is the feeling of belonging to a knowledge intensive company, often highlighted by the lived organizational culture affecting the individual identity (Alvesson, 2004). However, according to Sturges and Guest (2004), today's young generation attaches greater importance to a balance between work and non-work, which emphasizes the seeming contradiction of high workload with the desire for a good WLB and a stimulating work environment.

1.2   Research Purpose

The purpose of this research project is to acquire an understanding of how young professionals experience the phenomenon of WLB and how their understandings around this phenomenon are shaped. Therefore, our main research question is:

(1) How do young professionals experience the phenomenon of work life balance (WLB)?

On the one hand we acknowledge the literature, which claims that the consulting industry and its demanding working culture attracts in particular our target group, young professionals. On the other hand, some scholars claim that the young generation desires a positive WLB. In order to clarify this seeming contradiction, we aim to investigate how these two contrasting facts can be linked in order to minimize the discrepancy in the literature.

Additionally, we wish to contribute to the current theory by showing that WLB needs to be re-conceptualized in accordance to the individual experience. The current conceptualizations in the literature are manifold and therefore creating confusion with the term itself as well as with how to interpret it. We aim to differentiate from the current literature on professionals and WLB by providing a specific focus on young professionals in consultancies. This is supported by the fact that young professionals are the main target group in terms of recruitment for the consulting industry. This new angle, highlighting the non-generalizability of the WLB concept, incorporates the young professionals' individual experience and enables us to answer the following subordinate question:

(1.1)   How can the differences in WLB experience be accounted for?

With this subordinate question we intend to go beyond the individual understanding of the WLB concept and provide a more detailed understanding of the claim made by O'Mahoney and Markham (2013). According to them, the issue of people leaving the consulting industry due to long working hours and extended periods away from home can only be resolved, if the WLB initiatives provided by the company, are tailored to the needs of the individuals. To sum up, we aim to clarify the discrepancy in the literature on the topic of WLB and young professionals and therewith make a contribution to the theoretical and practical understanding, as the perspective of young professionals is valuable for KIFs but largely unexplored.

1.3   Thesis Outline

The thesis consists of six main chapters and covers both a theoretical and empirical analysis. After this introduction stating the purpose, the second chapter presents the relevant theories in the literature which enables us to derive the prevailing literature assumptions. We will challenge these literature assumptions with our findings in the analysis chapter. In order to make our approach transparent, we elaborate on the methodology in chapter three. As we apply the interpretive paradigm in our qualitative research, we believe that the world is socially constructed. Therefore, this approach supports our aim to understand how particularly young professionals experience the phenomenon of WLB. By drawing on the hermeneutic approach, we incorporate the context and language as well as our prior understanding of the topic. In chapter four we delve into our empirical findings, which build the fundament for the discussion of our research questions. Here, we will elaborate on the themes influencing young professionals' experience of the WLB phenomenon in consultancies. In the analysis and discussion chapter we will provide the reader with the answers to our research questions. In order to account for the differences in WLB experience, we provide a framework with different orientations towards the phenomenon. The last chapter consists of the conclusion, which entails a summary of the overall findings, the limitations as well as the implications for practice and suggestions for further research.

2   In Search of Work Life Balance in Knowledge Intensive Firms

The ratio between work and life has always been an issue with the potential to clash. The issue of WLB begun with the industrial revolution, since that time work started to be clearly separated from home by the establishment of factories. Additional reasons evolved over the past decades and increased the awareness for the topic work life balance (WLB); namely, the increase in competitive forces, the fast changing markets as well as the technology development, simplifying the information transfer enormously (e.g. Sturges & Guest, 2004). These global pressures caused a shift in boundary between work and personal life. Campbell Clark (2000, p. 748) titles people as "border-crossers", meaning that people continuously transit between the two *worlds* – the world of work and of non-work – to be able to respond to the demands of both settings. However, as the boundary has shifted more towards work life, in the sense that the pressures of work, such as demanding working hours, constant availability and increasing information load, have augmented (Guest, 2002), conflicts between the two worlds are emphasized. Work intensification is especially present in knowledge intensive firms (KIF), as they demand flexibility, full commitment and individual regulation of work from their employees (Alvesson, 2004). In exchange for the demanding job, a combination of monetary-, non-monetary- and career incentives have to be offered to the autonomous professionals in KIFs to make them willing to invest intensive hours in their work (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). To ensure that the professionals present the right company image, KIFs engage in identity construction, as the autonomous workforce cannot be directly controlled (Alvesson, 2004). Additionally, young professionals are characterized by being flexible, ambitious and career-oriented (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). In contrast, the young generation is currently devoting more attention towards a balance between work and non-work (Sturges & Guest, 2004).

With this chapter we aim to give an overview of the relevant literature on WLB, the concept of boundary management and its relation towards young professionals. Additionally, as our target group for this study is young professionals with a particular focus on young consultants, we further want to provide the reader with the background on the characteristics of KIFs as well as on the knowledge intensive worker. Then, we consolidate the previous

parts with the topic WLB in the consulting industry and finally derive the predominant literature assumptions. Overall, our objective with this chapter is to scrutinize the rather unexplored topic of WLB with regard to young professionals.

2.1 The Concept of Work Life Balance

WLB has different conceptualizations and depending on the context there are several understandings of how an optimal WLB should be constructed. With reference to our research questions on how young professionals experience the phenomenon of WLB and how the differences in experience can be accounted for, we structured the following section accordingly to establish a common understanding of the term which will help to disclose the current assumptions in the literature.

The interest in WLB has increased steadily during the past years (Sturges & Guest, 2004). One major trigger was the industrial revolution, which shifted the work from home to the industry. Before, the main reason for production was the own consumption whereas the industrial revolution developed the market economies and encouraged work being performed outside home. The acceleration of industrialization established the spatial distance between work and private life; creating the two traditional roles of the man as the "breadwinner" and the women as the "homemaker" (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 748). These roles are no longer applicable in today's world. Over the years, the number of women entering the workforce has risen, and hence, raising the necessity for a combination of work life and private life (Guest, 2002; Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper & Sparrow, 2013). This focus on female employees can also be found in the literature, where strategies are discussed on how to cope with the work/family boundary (e.g. Guest, 2002; Sturges & Guest, 2004; Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2002). Besides the work/family, the literature also shows an increasing concern for the wider community by using the more general term work/life or work/non-work to include more than merely the women and family aspect.

At present, the workforce has to deal with increasing work intensification due to the technological development. Mobile devices enable a constant connectivity and enlarge the workspace from the office to anywhere (Davis, 2013). The result is enhanced pressure and longer working hours especially during the evening and on the weekends, leaving fewer

possibilities for own quality time (Guest, 2002). According to Sturges and Guest (2004), the rising amount of work an individual has to deal with also makes the younger generation more attentive to the topic of WLB. They further point out that the younger generation's primary objective is to balance and integrate the personal needs with the work life as they ascribe more value to life than to work given that they witnessed the downsizing wave of the past. This is also supported by McGovern, Hope-Hailey and Stiles (1998) who state that a third reason for the changing work situation is the effect of downsizing, leaving the remaining employees with a higher workload. The three mentioned reasons, industrial revolution, technology development and downsizing fueled the relevance for WLB. The literature provides many conceptualizations of WLB; however, a single definition of how the optimal WLB situation should be designed is still open to discussion. To establish a common understanding and to reflect the ambiguity of the term WLB, the three words, work, life and balance will be scrutinized.

In regard to Guest (2002), who also looks at each word separately, *work* can be defined as the work performed within an occupation in exchange for a payment. However, elements such as the commuting time and over-time are often not regarded, which creates difficulties with this definition. In terms of technology, enabling to practice work anywhere, the separation between *work* and *life* gets more problematic, making a clear definition almost impossible. In general, the terms *life* or *non-work*, which are used synonymously in this thesis, can be accordingly described as "[t]he sphere of life or experience which is not related to paid employment or work; time not spent at work" (Oxford Dictionary, Online, 2015). This definition also assumes a clear boundary between work and life, which is no longer given in today's world due to the above stated factors. The last word that needs to be defined is *balance* which creates the assumption that work and life have a "50:50" distribution (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011, p. 119). This ratio must be carefully looked upon given that it implies the understanding of equal time consumption, involvement and commitment in each role (Greenhaus et al., 2002). A role can refer to the work-, family- and partnership life function an individual can have (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Furthermore, the study of Greenhaus et al. (2002) distinguishes between three different types of balance. First, they describe *time balance*, which concerns the time distribution between work and non-work. Second, they explain *involvement balance,* which refers to the commitment an employee has towards the personal roles she/he has in life. Third, the *satisfaction balance* is described by them as the degree of satisfaction with the work and non-work roles. The differentiation between time,

involvement and satisfaction balance emphasizes the several perspectives the term balance comprises (Greenhaus et al., 2002). An employee who works 80 hours per week is perceived as having a poor WLB in terms of time balance. However, as Greenhaus et al. (2002) point out, with regard to the involvement and satisfaction balance and her/his higher commitment and remuneration she/he receives, she/he might feel pleased. Overall, the gradual clarification of each word; work, life and balance, depicts the complexity of the term WLB.

Nevertheless, depending on the personal defined ratio, the individual perception of a distribution can either create a conflict between the roles or they can have a positive influence on each other. This interaction is of paramount importance for the WLB phenomenon. As Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011) explain, the "conflict perspective" (p. 118) indicates the possibility for clashes between the different roles an individual can have. On the other hand, they refer to the "enrichment perspective" (p. 118) as the positive result the different roles can have on each other. The descriptive models such as the spillover and the compensation theory confirm the influence work can have on life and vice versa in a more general way (Campbell Clark, 2000). The spillover theory summarizes the conflict and enrichment perspectives as it states that each domain can have an impact on each other in either a positive or a negative way. Whereas, the compensation theory goes further by stating that a lack in one sphere in terms of demands or satisfaction can be compensated by the other part of life (Guest, 2002). Both perspectives and theories support the belief that interdependency between work and non-work exists (Campbell Clark, 2000). The segmentation theory, which is the oldest view on describing the relationship between the two domains, assumes the clear separation of each part (Campbell Clark, 2000). The spillover as well as the compensation theory create the problem that they are regarded as competing (Lambert, 1990). Furthermore, they do not involve subjective indicators influencing the perception of a positive WLB. For a holistic understanding of WLB a comprehensive assessment is necessary which is broad enough to include the individual meaning of balance (Gatrell et al., 2013). A perfect balance for one person can be an imbalance for another (Guest, 2002). A further indicator which hints towards the subjective interpretation of the term as well as the dependence on context in which the topic is dealt with is the non-existence of a single definition. Therefore, our aim is to consider the individual within the organizational context. Depending on how she/he sets her/his boundary between work and life, an individual ideal balance between the two segments can be established.

Hence, Campbell Clark (2000) defines WLB as "satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict" (p. 751). This somewhat broad definition is suitable to acknowledge the personal perception of how WLB should be best designed individually. Moreover, Byrne (2005) highlights the personal control in his definition by stating "[w]ork life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work" (pp. 55-56). This personal influence and individual decision-making on when, where and how to work necessitates and demands flexibility from the employee and from the employer side. Thus, WLB is a phenomenon affecting more than the individual herself/himself, it further involves the environment (Lambert, 1990). This contextual aspect is supported by Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) who define WLB as an "accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains" (p. 458). The depicted definitions of WLB in our thesis add on different aspects underpinning the idea of a multidimensional character (Rantanen, Kinnunen, Mauno & Tilleman, 2011). To sum up, the literature proves the lack of consensus on a single definition of WLB and the confusion the term itself can create. Therefore, we argue that when referring to WLB, it is crucial to pay attention to the individual's perception and the context the employee is situated in.

2.2   A Shift towards Boundaryless Work

The advent of the industrialization era not only reshaped the economy but it also had a major impact on the society's previous understanding of the relationship between work and home (e.g. Campbell Clark, 2000; Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Therefore, with the industrialization and the emergence of factories, people started to engage in work outside their homes and at regular working hours. As Campbell Clark (2000), for example, points out, this shift finally resulted in a spatial and temporal separation of work and home. In other words, the individual divided its social existence into two separate domains, the work and the private, non-work domain (Campbell Clark, 2000; Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Accordingly, depending on the domain and the prevailing expectations, the individual reveals different selves (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). However, due to the recent advancement in technology, there have been radical changes within the work domain for the past few decades. As claimed by Hill, Miller, Weiner and Colihan (1998), this development leads to the gradual blurring of the boundaries between the work and non-work domains. For instance, they point out that with the introduction of

information and communication technologies in the business world, companies are able to offer virtual offices which allows the employees to conduct work independent of time and place. Research has shown that professionals within KIFs and management consultants particulary benefit from virtual offices as their work settings (e.g. Mellner, Aronsson & Kecklund, 2014; Davis, 2013). As knowledge is a professional's main working instrument, these professionals are not bound to a singular workplace and therefore enjoy a high degree of autonomy and flexibility regarding their work schedules as suggested by Mellner et al. (2014) as well as Peters, den Dulk and van der Lippe (2009). Despite the seeming advantages of the work arrangements, the trend towards a boundaryless organization requires the individual employee to engage in an ongoing negotiation of the mental and physical boundaries on her/his own terms (Nippert-Eng, 1996). In line with the prevailing assumptions in the literature, Mellner et al. (2014) argue that the increasing pressure towards the integration of both domains actually hinder the individiual to reach a WLB. This is supported by Ellingsaeter (2003, p. 436) who refers to "flexible hours, but boundless time demands". In this section, we delve into the concept of boundary management, and how individuals manage and negotiate the boundaries surrounding the domains in order to reach an overall balance between the realms of work and non-work. Furthermore, we touch upon the organizational responses with regard to the relationship of the work and non-work domains.

Boundary theory in the field of labor studies was originally developed by sociology professor Nippert-Eng in order to understand how individuals negotiate the different domains and the corresponding boundaries (Bulger, Matthews & Hoffman, 2007). According to Nippert-Eng (1996), the domains of work and non-work are understood as "conceptual categories, differentially imposed by mentally and physically drawing boundaries around activities, self, people, and things" (p. 28). She claims that although the conceptual categories are socially constructed and shaped by group thinking, the meaning of each category and what it actually encompasses varies from individual to individual. In particular, she points out that the individual conceptualization and relationship of the domains are heavily influenced by expectations regarding elements such as work group, occupation, friends or family. For instance, workplace policies about permitting personal phone calls or taking personal breaks during working hours affect how individuals define the boundaries between the domains (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Similar to Campbell Clark's work/family border theory (2000), boundary theory assumes that individuals actively draw the boundaries through the processes of either segmenting or integrating the domains (Bulger et al., 2007).

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In order to make sense of the plurality of boundary interpretations, Nippert-Eng (1996) introduced the integration-segmentation continuum. She explains that the integration end of the continuum stands for a complete integration of the work and non-work realms, whereas the segmentation pole emphasizes the incoherency of both realms. In her book, she further elaborates that an individual standing at the integration pole perceives the two domains as one and therefore draws no line that would separate the contents and meanings. In this case, Nippert-Eng (1996) states that the purpose of space and time is manifold, meaning that the individual experiences both domains with the same mental framework and behaves in a uniform matter when interacting with people traditionally belonging to different domains, such as her/his boss or spouse. In contrast to the integrator, she argues that the extreme segmentor perceives her/his social existence as being split into two completely separate spheres. Here, she points out that the boundaries are fixed, which prohibits a physical or temporal overlap between the work and non-work domains. For instance, while the work domain encompasses the workplace and the workdays, the non-work domain revolves around topics such as home, the evenings and weekends. Furthermore, she claims that the extreme segmentor's thinking and behavior are guided by two distinct, domain-dependent frameworks. In reality, however, the majority of people would position themselves in between the two poles but due to ongoing boundary negotiations, the position along the continuum is subject to constant change and is depending on the boundary work (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

Boundary work is the underlying process defining the extent of integration and segmentation of both domains (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2009). As stated by Nippert-Eng (1996, p. 7), "'boundary work' consists of the strategies, principles, and practices we use to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories". According to her, boundary work generally deals with placing and transcending boundaries, and affects three components. The three components concern the degree of overlapping between both domains with regard to people, objects, as well as behavior and thinking (Nippert-Eng, 1996). For instance, an individual may decide to take a highly segmenting approach when it comes to the people component, meaning that she/he avoids socializing with colleagues besides the working hours. However, the same person might be extremely integrating towards the objects of both domains by having one mobile phone for business and private purpose. Based on boundary theory, the components have a direct influence on the individual's position on the continuum (Kreiner et al., 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996). In the above mentioned example, the two effects offset each

other and this leads to the fact that the individual positions herself/himself in the middle of the integration-segmentation continuum.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals use boundary work as a means of dealing with work/non-work domain conflicts, Kreiner et al. (2009) classified four broad types of boundary work tactics. Firstly, they elaborate on *behavioral tactics* which suppose that the individual engages in social practices, for instance, meaning that actors from any domain actively engage into maintaining the individual's balance. Clark Campbell (2000) refers to these actors as border-keepers who have great influence in defining the domains and boundaries. Secondly, Kreiner et al. (2009) present *temporal tactics* which presume that the individual has the freedom of determining how much time she/he wants to devote to work and non-work respectively. In this line, the individual seems to be able to manipulate her/his work schedule by exchanging pre-defined work and non-work time slots on short notice in order to maximize the balance between the work and non-work domains. Thirdly, they refer to *physical tactics*, which permit the creation of physical boundaries on the individual's own terms through the use of physical artifacts. Based on this tactic, a consultant might put on his tie to signal that he is on duty and removing it might signal the end of his shift. Finally, Kreiner et al. (2009) conclude that *communicative tactics* revolve around setting expectations and confronting violators. This might suggest that individuals should communicate a sense of boundary to their social environment in the first place. However, if people violate the boundaries, the individual should confront the respective person in this regard afterwards (Kreiner et al., 2009). Besides the individual's active engagement in boundary work, also employing organizations increasingly deal with the topic of boundary management in order to offer their workforces favorable working conditions (Hall & Richter, 1988).

In light of the risen number of women in the workforce and the resulting surge of dual-earner families, organizations have finally become aware of the strains imposed on border-crossers (Kirchmeyer, 1995). Studies have shown that organizations have realized that they can no longer ignore the work/non-work domain conflicts of their employees as the two domains are intertwined and therefore affecting each other immediately (e.g. Kirchmeyer, 1995; Nippert-Eng, 1996). The idea of interdependence between both realms has already been pointed out by Moss Kanter (1977) when she referred to the "myth of separate worlds" (p. 78). Similar to Nippert-Eng's boundary management strategies on the individual level (1996), Kirchmeyer (1995) argues that the employing organization can facilitate the employee's boundary

management by either taking an integrating or segmenting stance. According to her, from an integrating point of view, the employer feels equally responsible for the employee's non-work as for the work domain. In contrast, the segmenting stance assumes that the employer regards the non-work realm as solely the responsibility of the employee (Kirchmeyer, 1995). However, scholars urge the companies not to introduce one-size-fits-all initiatives as the preference for integrating and segmenting varies strongly throughout the workforce (e.g. Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Davis, 2013). Therefore, it is still open to discussion which approach employers should pursue. While the popular press promotes integrating measures, Hall and Richter (1988) disagree and support the need for a rather segmenting and less integrating stance. In order to meet the needs of as many employees as possible, Kirchmeyer (1995) recommends that employers should take a respecting stance. This type of organizational response means that "rather than taking over workers' non/work responsibilities, this response provides workers with the personal resources to fulfill such responsibilities themselves" (Kirchmeyer, 1995, p. 517).

2.3   Knowledge Intensive Work

The concept of WLB is especially conflict-laden when it comes to boundaryless professions with flexible work arrangements (Allvin, Mellner, Movitz & Aronsson, 2013), as in most KIFs (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). A high rate of flexible work conditions and the individual regulation of work generate employee empowerment and reinforce creativity (Mellner et al., 2014), while at the same time, critical scholars put forward that the downside of this increased flexibility is the work intensification (e.g. Burchell, Ladipo & Wilkinson, 2002; Allvin et al., 2012).

Knowledge as a source of competitiveness is recognized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who confirms the great importance of knowledge in today's economy (OECD, 1996). Besides the increasing focus on knowledge-based goods and services, also the advancement of information and communication technology has affected the growth of knowledge intensive economies (Allvin et al., 2013). Currently, 10 to 15 percent of the total workforce in Europe and North America can be classified as knowledge-intensive (Alvesson, 2004) and with today's growing emphasis on knowledge and increasing demand

for knowledge workers (OECD, 1996), this number is about to accelerate in the coming decades.

KIFs can be defined as "organizations that offer to the market the use of fairly sophisticated knowledge or knowledge-based products" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 17). As Alvesson (2004) states, within these firms, the majority of the workforce has an academic education and the employees are referred to as knowledge workers or professionals. KIFs are characterized by highly educated individuals doing knowledge-based work, ad hoc organizational forms, being client-centered, and are expected to demand a high level of autonomy from their employees (Alvesson, 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). When looking at KIFs, Alvesson (2004) makes a distinction between professional services firms (PSF) and R&D firms. The former includes accounting and management consulting firms. PSFs deal to a large extent with intangible products, which have a direct influence on their clients (Alvesson, 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Knowledge, relational competences and reputation are the three core resources that affect the overall success of PSFs (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). According to the research, PSFs also distinguish themselves by having a partnership orientation, meaning that they have a structured hierarchical ladder for promotion and employees work towards ownership (Alvesson, 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). In addition, the professionals within the firm are expected to develop and move upwards throughout the years, which makes this specific career and promotion situation in most PSFs demand for knowledgeable, highly qualified and ambitious employees (Alvesson, 2004). Moreover, even though it is difficult to clearly identify pure professionals in consulting firms, as the requirements would only apply to professions such as doctors and dentists, Alvesson (2004) describes some key features which are applicable for professionals in PSFs. Accordingly, these individuals have a long, formal education, certain autonomy, are service-oriented and client-oriented (Alvesson, 2004).

Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011) refer to PSFs as being "people driven" (p. 89) given that the management of employees is a "strategic success factor" (p. 89). These firms rely on the theoretical and intellectual knowledge of their employees (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011) and this knowledge is according to Alvesson (2004) "one of the most vital sources of competition" (p. 8). KIFs in general and consultancies in particular depend heavily on the intangible source of knowledge (Alvesson, 2004; Løwendahl, 2005). Given the fact that the employees are the carriers of knowledge and the one's interacting with the clients (Kaiser &

Ringlstetter, 2011), the importance of the personnel issue is emphasized (Alvesson, 2004). However, due to the high amount of autonomy, the ambiguous nature of the work and the considerably little significance of systems, structures and technology, KIFs are regarded as non-managerial organizations, implying that direct control of professionals' behavior and their results is not applicable (Alvesson, 2004).

The non-managerial nature of KIFs, together with the intangibility of the services as well as the uncertainties around the work and outcomes make KIFs therefore image-sensitive (Alvesson, 2004), meaning that the image of a KIF is a critical success factor in obtaining and retaining clients. The image of an organization determines how both external actors and internal actors, the employees, view an organization. In case of KIFs, knowledge, expertise and problem solving capabilities are the main determinants which construct an organizational image and KIFs have to ensure that their workforce represents the right image and maintains the company's reputation (Alvesson, 2004). Therefore, KIFs engage in organizational identification to align individuals' identity with the company's identity and to enforce an anchored view of the organization's image (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). To engage in identity construction, Alvesson (2004) points out that some specific managerial tasks are very significant, such as creating a social integration and common purpose, developing an organizational culture, emphasizing the importance of client orientation among employees, investing in a corporate image and stimulating innovativeness. Moreover, Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011) as well as Løwendahl (2005) emphasize the importance for KIFs to invest in human resources. This is confirmed by Alvesson (2004) as he mentions that "recruitment, motivation, retention, and mobilization of employees, and long-term competence development" (p. 125) are essential management practices in KIFs. Pfeffer (1994) adds that "[…] building strong cultures to retain the skilled employees who constitute the basis of their success" (pp. 21-22) is key. The process of identity construction through human resources (HR) practices as well as managerial measures intends to develop and reproduce meanings of how organizational members identify themselves with the company (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The identification is based on a combination of establishing a particular pride among the workforce for being employed by the specific company, and the enforcement of employees' level of self-esteem because of the perceived status of the company (Alvesson, 2004).

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HR practices can be applied to achieve employees' commitment towards the organization and to ensure high quality services for the client (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011), as merely "highly motivated professionals render high quality performance" (p. 97). Thus, specific HR initiatives, such as focus groups, workshops, and strong corporate cultures are the key factors which influence the process of identity construction (Alvesson, 2004). In return, these HR practices contribute to increased productivity, commitment and a motivated workforce (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011; Pfeffer, 1994; Allvin et al., 2013). When further looking at the recruitment process, KIFs have a strong tendency to recruit university graduates (Alvesson, 2004). Young professionals are seen as a critical success factor for the company's profitability, since they are more likely to mold within the organizational culture as well as they generate the best ratio when it comes to fees charged for their services and their remuneration (Alvesson 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). In his book, Pfeffer (1994) identifies 16 interrelated practices for managing and motivating professionals of which some are specifically relevant for PSFs and relate to the three types of incentives: monetary, non-monetary and career, which are outlined by Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011). High wages and incentive pay can be referred to as monetary incentives, whereas employee ownership, participation and empowerment, training and skills development as well as cross-departmental teams and assignments can be classified as non-monetary incentives. Lastly, promotion opportunities and a long-term perspective belong to the career incentives (Pfeffer, 1994; Kaiser & Ringlstetter 2011). In general, we acknowledge the presence of identity construction in KIFs, nevertheless, the topic is so vast on its own and goes beyond the scope of this research project. Therefore, we primarily focus on the WLB literature.

The question arises to what extent the characteristics of PSFs attract young professionals. As Sturges and Guest (2004) concluded, even though qualified university graduates are concerned with their WLB, they happen to invest an excessive amount of hours in work, which results in an imbalance between their work life and private life. Moreover, multiple scholars have suggested that the relation between work and non-work is especially important for young employees and that they desire to have more flexibility to be able to integrate their private needs more easily (Sturges & Guest, 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Although PSFs attract many young, flexible and career-oriented individuals, for whom the intensive workload is acceptable in exchange for challenging assignments and above average pay (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011), the drivers encouraging young professionals to sacrifice most of their time is rather unexplored.

2.4 Work Life Balance in Consultancies

Consultancy firms demand intense working hours, a high amount of flexibility and a permanent motivation from the employee side in order to provide the client with the best possible service (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Another characteristic of consulting work is the high amount of traveling as the consultant performs her/his tasks often at the client's site. All these characteristics of the consulting profession often raise the impression of a *poor* WLB; *poor* in terms of the consultant not having enough spare time compared to the amount of work hours as highlighted with the phrases "working night and day", "working one's guts out" and "work around the clock" (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas & Davies, 2004, p. 548). Chapter 2.1 has shown that WLB is a phenomenon which can be experienced very differently based on the individual perception as well as the context a person is situated in (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Smith and Gardner (2007) support the notion of context dependence based on their study on factors affecting the use of WLB initiatives. These researchers have also shown that female employees use WLB programs more often than male colleagues with the aim to combine the work and life domains more efficiently and to avoid work-life conflicts. Initiatives such as flex-time and part-time work can support the perceived efficiency of the individual (Smith & Gardner, 2007). Furthermore, they proved that the use of WLB initiatives is dependent on the manager's support provided in the organization. Therefore, a supportive organizational culture might have a positive effect on the individual's experience of the work and life domains (Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999). Another benefit of working within the consulting industry is the flexibility the profession offers and hence the possibility for a positive experience of WLB (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). On the other hand, this unlimited flexibility bears the danger of causing a conflict between the work and life domains (Mellner et al., 2014).

As knowledge is the core asset of the consulting profession, consultants are able to perform their work anywhere and to organize their work schedule independently (Alvesson, 2004). This discretion enables a facilitating work setting (Mellner et al., 2014). However, the flexibility is only restricted by the inherent client focus of the consulting industry. Other influential factors on how an employee deals with WLB in the consulting industry are according to Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011) personality traits, personal values and attitude. The authors describe personality traits as an element that can determine the reaction shown in a specific situation given their predictable medium/long-term character. According to Kaiser

and Ringlstetter (2011), people with a negative affectivity assess the work/life situation more negatively than people with a positive attitude, which has a respective influence on their WLB. Moreover, they state that the personal attitude or value orientation towards the goals in work or private life are additional factors to consider. As they point out, a consultant striving for a successful career combined with a high commitment probably perceives the importance for WLB lower than a person focusing more on his private achievements such as having a family.

Furthermore, consultants often tend to play down the importance of having a WLB as this is usually associated with weakness (Meriläinen et al., 2004). The image of weakness might affect particularly young consultants who have entered a consulting firm directly after university. In this case, the young consultant's pristine individual identity is prone to be informed by the organizational identity and hence, fuels the particular consultant image. Successful consultants working for profitable consulting firms depict the *ideal* consultant as a person with an intense workload, who can be titeled as a "workaholic" (Meriläinen et al., 2004, p. 548), who barely can make time for any activities outside the work domain. This description is inherent in the consultants' talk (Meriläinen et al., 2004) and fueled even more by the organizations themselves who hire and promote only the best consultants (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The construction of a perfect consultant is portrayed as an individual who sacrifices a good WLB in order to deliver excellent results. If the latter traits are not exhibited a weakness can be perceived or as Meriläinen et al. (2004) state "an expression of a lack of motivation and disloyalty to the company" (p. 548) is shown.

Therefore, some factors in the consulting industry can have a negative effect on WLB whereas other can influence the experience of the phenomenon positively. The prevalent opinion that consultants have permanently a *poor* WLB can be challenged given the above stated factors.

2.5 Prevailing Assumptions in the Literature

Based on the literature review, we derived four main assumptions the literature holds with regard to the phenomenon of WLB and the way how young professionals relate to it. The assumptions are:

1. *Young professionals desire to have a work life balance (WLB).*

2. *The use of mobile devices results in increased pressure.*

3. *The prevailing flexibility of the professionals in knowledge intensive firms (KIF) results in blurred boundaries which tend to cause conflict.*

4. *Work and life are two separate domains which can be distinguished.*

Our assessment of the findings from the interviews (see chapter 4), will allow us to detect possible deviations in the claims made by the literature and the actual situation as stated by the young consultants. Furthermore, it might give insights for the re-conceptualization of WLB.

3   Methodology

In this study, our aim is to explore the following research questions:

(1) How do young professionals experience the phenomenon of work life balance (WLB)?

(1.1)   How can the differences in WLB experience be accounted for?

The first research question is of descriptive nature and enables us to gain an in-depth understanding of how young consultants relate to the WLB concept. Whereas, the subordinate research question requires a more explanatory approach to frame the differences in experience. The theoretical analysis in chapter 2 equips us with a profound knowledge of the current writings on WLB and serves as a solid foundation for examining the empirical research. The empirical findings in chapter 4 are drawn from interviews with consultants from one of the four leading accounting and consulting firms in Scandinavia. Since we chose a Big Four consulting firm as our research site, young consultants serve as our equivalent of young professionals. In addition, we aim to compare the theory and empirical material to understand the WLB concept as such and to challenge the current literature assumptions around the topic. In this chapter we present the methodological choices as well as our pre-understandings, which influence our approach towards the empirical research.

3.1   Research Approach

For our study we engage in qualitative research as we aim to get an in-depth understanding of how individual young professionals make sense of the phenomenon of WLB (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Kvale, 1996; Prasad, 2005). We support the belief that reality is not fixed; instead multiple constructions and different interpretations of reality exist (Merriam, 2002). The choice of methodology is based on the researcher's worldview which relates to the paradigm the researcher is committed to (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The paradigm clarifies the way of approaching and studying a project and consists of common fundamental assumptions that construct social reality (Morgan, 1980). Our worldview in this research project is based on the belief that individual young professionals interpret the concept of WLB in different ways, because of diverse experiences and different backgrounds. Due to the variety of WLB experiences, no consensus can be reached regarding the single experience of the phenomenon of WLB.

Based on this worldview, we as researchers approach this study project from the interpretive paradigm, as we share the idea that reality is socially constructed through different social interpretations and sense making (Prasad, 2005). Meaning that the way young professionals relate to WLB is affected through their own experiences, social interpretation and talks within their social environment. The interpretive approach allows a thick descriptive outcome and is therefore especially applicable considering the first research question (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). It enables us to gain an understanding of how young professionals perceive their social world and how they use their experiences to make sense of their own WLB in this particular context (Prasad, 2005). As we are interested in the experience from the perspective of young professionals, we conducted interviews with this particular group of interest.

Given the fact that our research process engages in the traditional *verstehen* philosophy in the form of textual interpretations and using our subjective understanding to determine the real meanings behind interview responses, our research stance is based on the hermeneutic approach (Prasad, 2005; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The interpretation of the interviews demands a sensitive approach since the interviewees' responses can be affected through mood and the contextual situation; therefore we carefully consider the context and language as well (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

One of the key concepts of hermeneutics is the researcher's prior understanding and awareness of prejudices (Prasad, 2005). As mentioned by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), we are "never free from preconceptions inherited from the past, preconceived meanings" (p. 120). We already have a pre-understanding of the concept based on information from our social context, management consulting lectures and through literature about topics such as management consulting, WLB, and organizational control. This pre-understanding guides us in how we see the particular phenomenon of WLB and it helps us to structure our interpretations.

There are four main pre-understandings we hold and which we discussed in an initial stage before embarking upon our research project. These pre-understandings consist of assumptions, which are constructed through our social context and therefore they might be biased. The first thought we have on the consulting industry is that *(1) consultancies do not provide room for the concept of WLB*. Based on experiences from friends who work in the consulting industry and guest lectures given by consultants, we suppose that WLB is not

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addressed in the consulting industry, because of the intense workload. Another assumption we all agree upon is that *(2) young professionals who just started their career do not care about WLB*. We perceive young professionals as highly ambitious people, who are eager to learn and willing to sacrifice most of their time and invest it in a promising kick-start of their career. Moreover, we are inclined to believe that *(3) young consultants are aware of the demanding working hours in the consulting industry before they enter their professional career*. One final common understanding we hold is that *(4) the concept of a boundary between work and private life is overrated with regard to young professionals*. We believe that the boundary is naturally blurred and that people do not consciously consider the locus of their boundary. This obscuring boundary can be partly caused by today's technological devices, which allow a closer and easier connection between the work and private domains.

Additionally, based on the hermeneutic circle, we engage in the continuous development of our pre-understandings to create new understandings. The hermeneutic circle assists us in understanding the underlying meanings of the data collected and to obtain an understanding of broader phenomena (Prasad, 2005). According to Prasad (2005), the meaning of a sole document, such as a transcribed interview, does not reside only in words and sentences. Moreover, she states that the researcher should take the wider context into consideration, such as company structure, culture, and relationships to be able to understand the texts. In return, the wider context can be explained and supported by a close analysis of texts, which can tell how organizational members perceive the organizational context (Prasad, 2005). The hermeneutic circle is a continuous process in our research process, in which there is constant interaction between the researchers, the text, and the context (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

However, it is of great importance that we control our own pre-understandings accordingly, in order to avoid a tunnel vision which hinders an out of the box thinking (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Hence, we also complement our interpretive approach with a more critical twist by adopting the critical paradigm. Although the critical stance shares the assumption that the world is socially constructed, its approach is more skeptical and incorporates the presence of power, domination and conflict when looking for the truth (Prasad, 2005). We could therefore also refer to *critical hermeneutics* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This approach also assumes that there are multiple realities but that power relations and conflicting interests determine how certain realities are recognized as the big truth in specific contexts (Sullivan, 2015; Prasad, 2005). Critical theory allows us to look at the research project from a broader

perspective in which the social context around the topic of WLB is imposed on individuals, companies and society as a whole through specific power relations and politics (Prasad, 2005). Instead of simply looking for underlying meanings from a hermeneutical point of view, the critical twist allows us to be reflexive and to go beyond our interpretations of underlying meanings and to reconsider them accordingly (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In addition, we plan to go beyond the general assumptions in the WLB literature (see chapter 2.5) and examine how this specific phenomenon is experienced by our particular target group, the young professionals.

3.2 Research Process

We embarked upon the research process by conducting two exploratory interviews in order to find out what aspects of WLB could be relevant for our study and consequently to gain inputs for the set-up of our future interview guide (see appendix B). This investigative strategy is consistent with the inductive approach common in qualitative studies as it allows building up theory by gathering data (Merriam, 2002). Based on the insights of the exploratory interviews, we then consulted the literature on WLB throughout the remaining data collection process. Therefore, for the overall research process we followed an abductive approach as this allowed us to go back and forth between the empirical findings and the literature on WLB (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Further, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) underpin the application of an abductive approach by stating that the use of either inductive or deductive strategy might include the danger of a "straitjacket" (p. 4).

3.2.1 Sample

In line with our research aim to investigate young professionals' experience, we decided to collaborate with one of the leading firms in the accounting and consulting industry, one of the so-called Big Four. The Big Four companies spare no expense when it comes to the recruitment of the brightest students and recent graduates by giving guest lectures, organizing mingle events and being present on career fairs. The fact that those consultancies heavily invest into student and employer branding shows that young professionals are an indispensable company asset (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Due to personal contacts, we were granted access to a Big Four company, based in Copenhagen, which allowed us to conduct interviews.

We have drawn upon interviews as a common qualitative research method in order to obtain data (Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, the interview findings stem from eleven young consultants employed in quantitative departments focusing on the financial services industries. These young consultants represent our sample group of young professionals. They provided us with insights of their experiences with regard to the phenomenon of WLB. The eleven participants fulfilled our requirements we held for belonging to the group of young professionals. In other words, we define a consultant as a *young* consultant as long as the individual is working in an entry-level position and is therefore at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy (see figure 2, appendix A). In our case, the fulfilling of the requirement resulted in the participation of five female and six male consultants from Scandinavia, who are with the company for nine months in average and aged 24-29.

3.2.2   Data Collection Method

We relied on the total of eleven interviews as the primary source for the data collection. According to Kvale (1996), an interview conversation enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon from the subject's point of view which is socially constructed by its interaction with the working environment. In order to maintain a certain flexibility throughout the interview process, we followed a semi-structured interview guide (appendix B) (Merriam, 2002). In particular, this specific interview form allowed us to deviate from our interview guide and pose follow-up questions when needed (Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, the interview guide helped us not to lose the common thread and to ensure that we covered the pre-determined broad topics during the conversations with the sample group. The interview questions we created were directly and indirectly related to our research questions and we constructed them based on the prevailing topics we discovered during the two exploratory interviews as well as topics we found in the literature. The questions in the interview revolved around; spare time and hobbies, motivation for joining the consulting industry, the description of ordinary work days and the job itself, spatial boundaries between work and private life, specific questions with regard to their experience of the phenomenon of WLB, and finally, WLB initiatives and talks from their social environment. At the end of each interview, we posed two *Likert* scale questions in order to find out whether their talk of WLB corresponds to the numerical value they ascribe to the phenomenon.

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The interviews were scheduled by a personal contact we had within the company. As consultants are generally tight in time, we opted for 45 minutes time slots in order to attract as many participants as possible. As all of us were experienced in conducting interviews from previous jobs, we were able to gain as much information as needed by creating a trustful atmosphere and let them elaborate on the questions without our interference. Being a group of three researchers allowed a favorable interview setting, while two researchers were actively leading the interview, the third researcher took a more passive role by observing the interviewee and pose questions not raised by then. To be able to understand the perceptions of the participants and the way they experience the phenomenon of WLB, we conducted individual face-to-face interviews in meeting rooms of the respective company. The conversations were recorded and then transcribed true verbatim. Furthermore, the company and interviewees names were changed into pseudonyms, in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

3.3   Data Analysis

We conducted the eleven interviews over the course of three days at the Big Four consulting firm in Copenhagen. After each interview a short pause was scheduled, which allowed us to briefly reflect on our interpretations and discuss prevailing themes. This identification of recurring themes and certain patterns was the start of our data analysis process. The iterative process of collecting and analyzing simultaneously (Merriam, 2002) enabled us to make adjustments throughout the interview process as well as it increased the validity and reliability of the process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Moreover, it provided us with the opportunity to incorporate the environmental context as well as to make each other aware of our interpretations, which is in line with our hermeneutical stance (Prasad, 2005).

We recorded all the interviews to ensure that we were not missing out on any expressions. After having conducted the interviews, we transcribed the conversations right away in order to capture also the body languages exhibited during the interviews. As we recorded all the interviews, we were able to transcribe the entire interview content true verbatim. Once the interviews were transcribed, we decided to divide the eleven interviews randomly into two groups; group A and group B. As our pre-understandings were affected by certain impressions and thoughts throughout the course of the interview days, we decided upon mixing the

interviews from the three days into these two groups, to avoid the predominance of certain pre-understandings in our coding process. As we adopted an abductive approach, we aimed at going back and forth between the literature and the empirical material. Based on that stance, we chose to start coding with group A, in order to identify the prevailing themes and to become more acquainted with the data before elaborating on the literature review. Each of us coded the five interviews individually by color marking and commenting on words, sentences and expressions. We applied the techniques suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003); we looked for attributes such as metaphors, similarities and differences. Once we finished the individual coding of group A, we collected our thoughts, the themes we found and the ideas we had with regard to interrelated topics during a group meeting. We then created a mind map and examined the most dominant topics and their importance in relation to our research question. The themes mainly derived from the interviews, but were slightly supported by our prior theoretical findings as well as our pre-understandings.

On completion of the coding process of group A, we continued with our literature review. Even though we already agreed upon certain main aspects which had to be included, based on our research proposal, the coding of group A allowed us to gain a clearer view of what theory had to be incorporated in the literature review chapter. Once the theoretical part of the thesis had been established, we initiated the coding process of group B, which consisted of six interviews.

The coding of group B was conducted in the same manner as the coding of group A. After we coded group B individually, we discussed the main themes we discovered and related them to the themes and sub-themes we already had found in group A. Subsequently, we went once again individually through each of the eleven interviews and noted down the most prevailing topics on post-it notes. This included quotes, expressions, key words and word co-occurrences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Thereafter, we sorted the notes according to different themes, including the themes we found in the first coding process from group A, and linked them to our research questions. Successively, we inserted the themes we had found and the notes we made in an excel file, to have a clearer overview of the prominent themes and supporting data. We then cut and sorted the quotes, expressions, key words and word co-occurrences to determine sub-themes. This extensive cutting and sorting process required us to come up with precise and coherent definitions of each theme and sub-theme in order to illustrate their distinctiveness. The process allowed us to examine the most salient themes as well as it

represented a good technique for structuring the main themes and sub-themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Overall, the data analysis is one of the core elements of this research project as it builds the foundation of our research questions.

3.4   Reflexivity

In qualitative studies the researcher is the primary instrument in collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2002). This applies also to our qualitative study with the advantage that we as researcher can process, analyze and compile the data. On the other hand, we, as the "human instrument" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5), bring in the complications of our subjectivity and biases we carry in us (Merriam, 2002). As our overall goal is to understand how young professionals relate to the topic of WLB, we have to be aware of our personal social construction as part of the context given that it can exert an influence on the process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Therefore, we aim, in line with Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), to maintain a reflective stance to provide a study with the characterization of being as objective as possible. The aim to minimize the personal influence on the data of our study can be achieved by careful interpretations including conscious reflections (Alvesson, Hardy & Harley, 2008). We aimed to self-reflect on us as the researchers by acknowledging the "theoretical, cultural and political context" we are surrounded and affected by (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 269), without letting any of the constructing parts dominate. To be more specific, we had the objective, as stated by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), to prevent "empiricism, narcissism and different varieties of social and linguistic reductionism" (p. 269). To be reflexive means in this study to reflect on the whole process in which research is carried out and to understand how every part of the process shapes the outcome (Holland, 1999).

As our research stance is based on the hermeneutical approach, we automatically have incorporated our pre-understandings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). However, due to our reflexivity we tried to break the frame by discussing upfront our four main assumptions (see chapter 3.1). As already mentioned above, throughout the interview and coding processes and while interpreting the data, we made each other aware of them. By doing so, we tried to manage the assumptions and provide the reader of this master thesis with the transparency to give her/him the possibility to take them into account (Hardy, Phillips & Clegg, 2001).

In line with what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) recommend, we applied an additional approach, namely the critical paradigm, to avoid naive interpretations and to take nothing for granted. With the application of an additional paradigm we were able to distance ourselves from the material and look upon the data from another perspective to uncover, examine and critique the existing assumptions (Prasad, 2005). The objective of incorporating an additional theory allowed us to move between different interpretations and impedes to be locked in one specific stance (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The confrontation of the several levels of interpretation supports the exploration of our own interpretations on the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As pointed out by multiple scholars (e.g. Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), social norms color our conceptions, values and motives and therefore we made use of interview statements to avoid our pre-understandings from distorting the actual responses.

In the context of reflexivity, another contribution is the increase in reliability and therewith validity by our elaboration on our thoughts and the overall research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In general, we aimed for "trustworthiness" of our research project, which is comparable to the usually pondered validity and reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 236). First, we made our assumptions transparent. Second, with the use of an interview guide we conducted semi-structured interviews in order to have a guidance through the interview as well as to be able to dig deeper by asking follow-up questions to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the experience young professionals hold on the phenomenon of WLB. As stated in chapter 3.2.2, the interview was designed in the way that two researchers were leading the interview and one observed the interview situation. The observer had the possibility to intervene if she thought a relevant question was left out or missing.

Due to our aim to understand how young professionals make sense of the WLB concept in a context-specific setting, namely the consulting industry, we cannot generalize our findings. A further reason for the non-generalizability is the fact that the interviews only depict one moment in time and is therefore only a snapshot of the interviewees' current situation. However, we as researchers strive to make a contribution to a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of WLB with a special regard to the experience of young professionals.

4 Empirical Findings

Throughout the interviews, seven salient themes emerged which contributed to our understanding of how young consultants make sense of the concept of work life balance (WLB) and how they personally relate to it. We will initiate this chapter with an introduction of our eleven interviewees, to provide the reader with an understanding of their background and their personal view on the phenomenon of WLB. Subsequently, the seven main themes will be analyzed.

4.1 Profile of the Interviewees

Since our first research question is engaged in obtaining an understanding of how young professionals experience the phenomenon of WLB, the following sub-chapter will provide a short profile description of the interviewees. By providing the reader with a background of the participants, we aim to point out that their work experience at the company, as well as how they spend their spare time, reflects how they relate to the concept of WLB. Moreover, we want to highlight that the way how the concept of WLB is perceived, is very individual.

Gustav, 24 years old

Gustav started working at the company seven weeks ago, after he completed his studies in Industrial Engineering. He has a passion for martial arts and also enjoys windsurfing and traveling. He relates to WLB as to have as much spare time as he likes, while still being able to make a good impression at work.

Oskar, 25 years old

Before joining the company as a consultant one year ago, Oskar worked for the same company as a student assistant. In his spare time, he likes to be physically active and enjoys to go for runs. For Oskar WLB means that work is not prioritized over his life, in a sense that parts of his private life should not suffer too much. Therefore, he believes in the importance of setting boundaries for himself before going into something.

Viktor, 26 years old

Viktor and Gustav started together at the company after they had finished their Master thesis. He enjoys playing golf but also likes to discover Copenhagen as he is new in the city. Viktor refers to WLB as a scale, which controls that the work domain does not encroach the life domain and vice versa.

Sofia, 29 years old

Before joining the company a year ago, Sofia worked for the Danish government. In her free time, she practices ballet twice a week and enjoys to read classic literature. Sofia experiences a good WLB when she can work in accordance with her biorhythm. She explains that she is happy as long as the company enables this.

Sara, 27 years old

Sara is very new in the company as she started three weeks ago. Before joining the company, she was employed by the Confederation of Danish Industry. She spends her spare time with her fiancé, family and friends but also likes to practice yoga. For her, WLB means to have the freedom to do things that make her happy. However, this does not mean to get off work every day at five or six in the evening; it is the flexibility that gives her a balance.

Malin, 26 years old

Malin joined the company nearly a year ago, right after her studies of political science. Besides work, she enjoys cooking and organizing youth conferences. She is skeptical towards the concept of WLB. According to her, WLB is just a buzzword and overused as a means to complain. Instead of differentiating between a life at work and a life at home, Malin prefers to look for synergies between both worlds. Furthermore, she argues that a poor WLB might not be caused by the amount of working hours but rather by problems occurring in the private life.

Emma, 28 years old

Emma is with the company for 15 months and currently working on a project in Switzerland during the week. She enjoys going back to Copenhagen every weekend to meet her friends for yoga and coffee. Given that she regularly worked 70 hours in her previous department, which made it impossible to visit her family for 1.5 years, she regards WLB as important. For her,

WLB means to have a balance which allows her to do her job properly, while still having the time to be social and have her own private life.

Olaf, 27 years old

Olaf started his career nine months ago, after he left his former job at an energy trading company. Besides work, he is passionate about playing football and doing Cross Fit exercises. His view on WLB is to have the weekends off but also to put a great deal of effort during the week. However, he is willing to take extra assignments and to work as a slave for 2-3 years in order to get promoted quickly.

Fredric, 28 years old

Fredric left his previous job at the Danish Financial Regulator and Supervisor eight months ago due to the non-stimulating culture. In his life, he has three main priorities – his work, his hobby break dancing and his girlfriend. For him personally, WLB is all about happiness, meaning that as long as his three priorities make him happy, he feels balanced. He further claims that the definition of WLB is not just a ratio or an amount, it is rather about the quality of life.

Björn, 27 years old

Björn joined the company six months ago, after having studied economics. In his spare time, he spends much time with his girlfriend. Together, they go for runs, enjoy good food in restaurants and travel the world. For Björn, WLB means to have a high workload as it is interesting and exciting but besides work, there should be room for fun things, such as traveling or going out for dinner and shows.

Nina, 25 years old

Nina studied business management and joined the company 1.5 years ago. Besides work, she likes to meet friends and do sports but she also admits that she does not have enough time currently to do exercises due to the heavy workload. In her opinion, WLB is the proportion she spends on work and private life, and currently the emphasis is clearly on work. However, it does not bother her to work that much as she sees it as a temporary phase while being young.

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4.2   The Ambitious Young Professionals

Based on the interview responses and our observations, we identified characteristics such as being ambitious, performance driven and competitive as salient for young professionals. Ambition is seen as key by all of them. They all used the term to describe themselves and to refer to the kind of personalities working as consultants. Gustav for example, relates ambition to the busy, work intensive consulting job. The level of ambition influences how the interviewees relate to WLB:

> *[...] if you link [your WLB] to ambition, that you work more hours to over-perform some of your superiors. (Olaf, 27)*

This quote also emphasizes the competitiveness and performance driven personality inherent in young consultants. However, the ambition level of a person is seen as very individual which is supported by the employer:

> *In here, the WLB perception is like 'it is not 40 [hours] but it is also not 70 [hours]', but somewhere in between and you choose depending on your ambitions and how much you want to work. (Fredric, 28)*

As they are all in the early stage of their career, they have a certain purpose of proving themselves, not necessarily with regard to their peers and superiors, but also with regard to themselves. Therefore, they often do self-study at home in order to be successful at work. Besides the excitement of learning and ambition to perform, many young consultants see the extra hours they make as an investment in their future. Oskar looked upon this investment by making a cost/benefit analysis. Whether it is an email he replies to during his spare time or the additional hours at the office, he experiences the added value it gives to his career.

4.3   The Consulting Job – Challenging and Rewarding

All the interviewees regard their job as rewarding and challenging at the same time. The demanding nature of the consulting industry becomes to some extent insignificant as the young consultants are motivated by the dynamic, volatile and flexible work environment.

Throughout the interviews, the young consultants repeatedly emphasized that the diversity in tasks and projects is one of the main aspects which attracts them to the consulting job. For instance, Gustav enjoys to continuously face new projects and problems, as this requires him to familiarize himself quickly with different topics in order to be perceived as an expert in

diverse fields. However, Viktor points out that the ability to cope with the steep learning curve is sometimes also stressful, but he generally agrees with Gustav, who describes his job as "[…] the excitement of learning something new and just implementing it straight away." Overall, the young consultants seem to look upon their consulting job as an interphase between university and their future career outside the consulting industry as Olaf elaborates:

> *[…] I think the toolbox you get here is really good. You get like a lot of like the core competences that you can use later on in your working life. […] So, for me I had the mind-set like I can do crazy hours for like 4 years and then I can go back to the industry like settle down for less hours. […] The network is also a huge factor because yeah you get new connections in a lot of companies. (Olaf, 27)*

In the light of the structured hierarchy prevalent in the industry, the interviewees are aware of what the following steps are in the career ladder and what efforts to put in to get promoted. Although Malin points out that at this career stage it is not common to reward hardworking young consultants through accelerated promotions, Oskar looks upon this from a different perspective. Even though there is no direct promotion linked to hard work and full dedication, he states that the extra efforts benefit him going forward and make him more valuable in the long-term. Oskar explains that "[…] you develop a face to yourself and people get to know who you are and what you're good at."

4.4   It's not the Quantity but the Quality of Hours

The interviewees mentioned an average work week of 45 to 55 hours, which means that they always exceed the contractual working hours of 37.5 hours. Depending on the project, they even reach peaks of 60 to 70 hours a week. Besides the client projects, the interviewees have to consider additional hours for internal work. The hard work is alternated by hours in which there is room for socializing with colleagues during coffee breaks as well as getting off work on Fridays at 3 p.m. to hang out together and have a drink. Besides, as Oskar mentions, it is not about the "amount of hours but it is the type of hours", referring to having fun in your job and enjoying the work you do. Or as Fredric explains:

> *For me, I wasn't very stimulated at the [previous] job, could be a bit tiresome…so actually I feel, even though I work more hours here, more stimulated here. A seven hours workday where you are bored feels heavier than a ten hours workday where you are active and you do your stuff that is interesting. (Fredric, 28)*

However, there are also downsides of the demanding working hours and flexibility. For example, Viktor finds it difficult to predict his work amount over a longer period of time as this is highly dependent on the project but also on his own ambition level. Nevertheless, all the interviewees agree with Viktor who states "you would not choose a job like this or the hours we have, it is also kind of an interest." Moreover, they are in the early stage of their career and willing to invest:

> [...] I am young at this moment and in the upcoming years it is fine like this. But let me say, in 6-7 years from now I don't want to be that busy as I am now. So for now I accept it and I like it, but I also already know that I won't keep it like this. (Nina, 25)

They all value the work intensity as fair in their current situation and are willing to sacrifice a part of their spare time for the job, as they enjoy their work and the work environment.

4.5 Flexibility in both Ways

Throughout the interviews we detected that young consultants generally take an integrating stance when it comes to dealing with the work and non-work domains. Based on the high degree of self-management and flexibility at work, they experience a gradual blurring of the boundaries, facilitated through the use of mobile devices. The constant availability given, no matter in which domain they are situated, provides additional flexibility. Overall, the flexibility at work leads to flexible boundaries which has an impact on how young consultants relate to the WLB phenomenon.

During the interviews, all the participants repeatedly mentioned the term *flexibility* in order to describe their work setting. They particularly appreciate the flexibility because it allows them to shift their times according to their own discretion. One of the young consultants, Malin, regards the flexibility as a unique attribute of the profession and concludes "you don't have that at a normal job." All the interviewees had examples of how they specifically benefit from the flexible work setting in order to combine their work and non-work obligations. For instance, Sara claims that for her personally it is "the flexibility that gives me a balance" and therefore, she is able to keep her temporary stress level low. Emma agrees with Sara in this matter and explains that the high confidentiality of her current project abroad forbids her to work on the project as soon as she leaves the client's office and this "stresses me out

completely." In line with this, Sofia adds she likes that the flexibility goes both ways, meaning that the possibility to work from home contributes to her efficiency.

In order to provide such a flexible work setting, the employer equips the young consultants with laptops and mobile phones, which are also meant for personal use, enabling a permanent availability. However, being available for work while being in the non-work domain is not perceived as stressful, to the contrary as Emma states "I have probably never turned off my phone that sounds scary" and Malin supporting this view by saying "I would totally get stressed that I will not have access to my email". One reason why they perceive it as normal is the fact that for their generation the constant availability feels natural, as they grew up with the technology. A second reason is according to Oskar, that the flexibility allows him to be available for his friends during work and available for work when at home. In particular, he spends 20 percent of his time on non-work related tasks, such as Facebook, and vice versa, in order to keep the focus on the current task.

4.6   You are your own Boss

Throughout the conversations the interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the nature of the consulting job demands a high degree of self-management and the ability to set priorities. In particular, each consultant needs to assess and prioritize on her/his own the work tasks and ultimately organize her/his work schedule. The freedom to determine their own work schedule also seems to affect how young consultants organize the interplay between the work and non-work domains.

According to Björn and Olaf, young consultants are familiarized with the idea of being their own boss and taking charge of their own calendar already from the beginning of their career. Given the fact that a great many of projects are based on cross-divisional teamwork, project leaders usually cannot be bothered to check each consultant's calendar individually. All interviewees enjoy the high degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, the courage to reject a project if they feel they have not enough capacity to fully perform on the assignment is of high importance. Otherwise, if they put up with everything and do not object, the superiors expect that the execution of the project is feasible. Some interviewees found it particularly difficult

in the beginning to cope with the numerous inquiries coming from different superiors and feeling the pressure to please everyone.

The self-management finds its limitation with regard to client work. Olaf regularly subordinates his private obligations to the interest of the work domain when facing a deadline. Nevertheless, besides the peak periods, the job enables the young consultants to combine their hobbies with work, as Sofia for example leaves for ballet lessons and returns afterwards to finish her work tasks. The interviews have emphasized that the ambitious young consultants are aware of the necessity of setting the right limits beforehand when being constantly exposed to a large number of exciting new projects.

4.7 Work Life Balance Initiatives – Time-Consuming

As the experience of WLB is also informed by the organizational context, we identified three modes – visible measures, talk and culture – of how the company (actively) engages in the topic of WLB based on the interviewees' statements.

The *visible measures* encompass initiatives the interviewees perceived as being somehow related to the topic of WLB. Firstly, they all mentioned a survey which the company conducts every other week. The survey examines the individual experience of how teams are performing but additionally covers the WLB issue. However, the young consultants do not know what the company draws out of the results or if any actions have been made so far. Secondly, they refer to the counsellor-counselee structure, which assigns every consultant a senior who advises them mainly in the career planning but also in personal matters. Thirdly, the female consultants mention the *female focus group*, a network exclusively for female employees. The network does not focus on WLB, but as women often face the problem of combining the work and life domains, it is an occasion to talk about WLB. Finally, Emma appreciates the individual travel arrangement she has with the company in Switzerland, which enables her to design the work and especially the traveling aspect more at her convenience. She perceives the current situation as "non-stressful" as it allows her to see her friends three days a week.

Although the young consultants are not aware of any particular company initiatives to support their WLB, they are positive towards the company's efforts, which are more indirectly lived through the *talk* about the WLB phenomenon instead of tangible measures:

> *No, I think they actually do relatively, like indirectly not explicitly, but you can feel that they care [...]. They try to think about...I don't know how [chuckles]...(uh), I don't know, I mean...no, actually they don't, I cannot really put a finger on it and say this is what they do. But it is just a feeling that I have. (Oskar, 25)*

According to Sara, the talk about WLB starts already during the hiring process and continues on a daily basis. However, Malin feels uncomfortable if she is constantly reminded by her colleagues to "[…] 'remember to take care of yourself, remember to relax'".

The young consultants view the *company culture* as outcome driven, as they are held to deliver projects of top quality to the clients. Therefore, they are constantly reminded to manage their resources, as Fredric elaborates:

> *[...]'you should know when to say NO to a task, so you can perform a 100% in the task you are doing instead of performing 50% in everything' I don't know if it is a WLB thing or if t is an efficiency thing. (Fredric, 28)*

The experience of the WLB phenomenon of the interviewees tells that the WLB issue is to some extent dealt within the company. WLB is mainly touched upon when discussing gender equality as this contributes to a positive image of the company. However, the female interviewees in particular mention that the culture is rather male-dominated and that more women in top positions could function as role models. This would enhance the by Sofia mentioned "new movement" of having, for example, a female CEO who shows that private life and work life can go hand in hand. Also Emma experiences a difference in gender. She is aware of the fact that the company aims to retain the female employees and that therefore her boss, who she describes as being a "workaholic", enables her to set different standards in working hours and taking time off.

The general perception of the interviewees is that the company should only invest in WLB initiatives in the light of profit maximization. Based on the belief that they are in charge of their own life and WLB, the young consultants do not express a need for WLB initiatives. Instead, they regard it as counterproductive as it would take time away from their personal life. Fredric mentions that as long as the company provides a "framework where I can move within", it is sufficient. He perceives the young consultants not as the target group for such

initiatives because they already have a good WLB. In his eyes, WLB initiatives are only necessary for employees struggling to combine the work and life domains.

4.8   Develop a Face to Yourself

Throughout the interviews, statements and descriptions were given which indicate the presence of normative pressures, such as company pressure and peer pressure, which results in the individuals engaging in image management. These often *invisible pressures* affect how the young consultants look upon their personal WLB and how they relate to the benchmark of socially accepted norms within the company.

One type of pressure emphasized in our data is the *superior pressure* inherent in the organizational culture, which can be present in the habits and behavior of seniors and top management. Even though the young consultants do consciously experience the pressures; they do not necessarily experience it negatively. The young consultants mentioned that they aim to be perceived as efficient in order to make a good impression on their superiors, although the promotion opportunities are fixed. Oskar points out that by taking on extra tasks he establishes a reputation in the company, which will benefit him in the future. He approaches the pressure of being available strategically, meaning that he considers the "[…] cost of replying to [an] e-mail" as a way to "earn extra points". In comparison to Oskar, other interviewees perceive it more as a pressure. Depending on the manager, they do not feel comfortable to switch off their phones or leave their computers behind. Sofia even feels the pressure during her holidays:

> *I think it's getting better. Like in the beginning it is hard to know what the benchmark is. Like my previous boss at [the other Big Four consulting firm] he was himself like a crazy workaholic. He only worked, worked, worked and nothing else. Then he was on holidays, where he was physically present but probably not mentally. And it kind of puts an intangible pressure on you. Because if everyone else is working [on holiday] you feel like 'ohh ahm, then I'm a good employee'. (Sofia, 29)*

Besides the superior pressure, the *peer pressure* is another topic raised by the young consultants. Peer pressure is visible in form of peers' behavior, in talks and through actions. Regarding the consultants' availability, it is not only the superior who signals a constant availability also their colleagues influence this trend. They do it because everyone does it and

they log-in during the weekends, because a lot of people are online. The young consultants feel the pressure that they have to prove themselves in order to fit in the environment. Furthermore, even if the company does provide them with the flexibility to leave early in less busy periods, Emma and all the other interviewees mentioned the feeling of discomfort:

> *[…] But I do feel weird when I leave early and I see all the others sitting, then I feel bad. I kind of feel like 'Oh they are working so hard and they must think I'm a slacker'. (Emma, 28)*

Overall, it depends on the individual to what extent they are vulnerable to normative pressures and how it does affect their behavior. Together, the superior and peer pressure make the young consultants aware of how they want to be perceived and what *image* they want to produce within the company. For instance, Fredric elaborates on a time sheet which is distributed in the company on a weekly basis, listing everyone's hours and activities. Such visible lists serve as a guideline for setting the benchmark. They consciously think about which measures they have to take to accomplish certain achievements, as pointed out by Emma and Fredric:

> *[…] I started thinking that I could do more in order to improve my career for at least where I stand when it comes to promotion and all this stuff. (Emma, 28)*

> *[…] so it is also important for me to get a good feedback from the manager on that project, that is again important for my performance here and my promotion opportunity. (Fredric, 28)*

The impression they leave, can either help or constrain their future development within the company. The aim to get good feedback, the drive to perform and the development of a good reputation are all variables which they consider and which refer to their individual *image management*.

4.9 Summary Findings

We have learnt that young professionals are highly ambitious and performance driven individuals who are willing to invest in their career. Therefore, they do additional hours of self-study on work related topics in their spare time to stay competitive. Consistent with the young professionals' characteristics, the interviewees are motivated by the dynamic and volatile work environment as well as the performance culture prevalent throughout the industry. Although they perceive the lack of an ordinary workday sometimes as stressful, the positive effects of engaging in different projects and encountering new challenges prevail.

Also regarding the work intensity, the interviewees look upon it from a positive stance as they knew what to expect before entering the industry. While they normally exceed the contractual working time of 37.5 hours per week and depending on the project even reach peaks of 70 hours, they are willing to sacrifice some leisure time for a job and work environment they truly enjoy.

The consulting job allows the young consultants to choose their own projects and self-manage their own work schedule, which gives them great flexibility when coordinating professional with personal obligations. Furthermore, we have found out that the interviewees see the work and non-work domains as separate but they approach them from an integrating stance, meaning that while being in the non-work domain they perform work-related tasks and vice versa. The integration is facilitated by the use of mobile devices, which encourages the young consultants to be available even during weekends and holidays. However, being available is not perceived as stressful and legitimized by the idea of efficiency. Moreover, the flexibility leading to blurred boundaries is seen as giving the individual a certain balance.

Another point we explored is the organizational influence on the young consultants' experience of WLB. Although the interviewees think that WLB is a topic within the company based on visible measures, the talk of WLB and the culture of flexibility, they cannot think of a specific program initiated by the company. However, they do not feel the necessity for such programs as they argue that the company already enables them to have a good WLB because of the flexible work setting. This feeling might also be influenced by invisible pressures coming from peers and superiors, which affect especially young consultants who are not yet familiar with the benchmarks. In order to quickly develop a positive reputation within the company, they try to please everyone by trying to outperform the others.

Overall, we have discovered that how the young consultants relate to the concept of WLB varies from individual to individual and is informed by the personal experience from the past. In general, they value their WLB but it is not a priority in their current lives. In addition, the majority questions the WLB concept for its implied ratio notion; instead they prefer to look upon it from a more macro perspective by considering how they feel about the quality of their lives.

5 Analysis & Discussion

Within this chapter we discuss the answers to the research questions based on the findings from the previous chapter. Taking the characteristics of young professionals into account, as well as their previous work experience level and the work environment, our research questions can be answered:

(1)   How do young professionals experience the phenomenon of work life balance (WLB)?

(1.1)   How can the differences in WLB experience be accounted for?

As the precedent chapter outlined, young consultants share the common characteristics of being ambitious, performance driven and career oriented. Nevertheless, we discovered that within the target group of young consultants, who are all positioned in the first level of the hierarchical ladder (see figure 2, appendix A), differences can be detected in how they relate to the concept of WLB. In the findings chapter, we derived three leading topics from the seven themes, which shape the young consultants' experience of the WLB phenomenon, namely; their personality, their level of previous work experience as well as the organizational context. Based on these three topics, we discovered four orientations which all demonstrate a distinct view towards the phenomenon of WLB.

In accordance to the four distinct orientations, we developed the Work Life Quality Framework. The four orientations represent four different types of young consultants who all have a diverse view on the WLB concept. Their diverse views are nurtured by the previously mentioned three core topics, which can be referred to as drivers: (1) their personalities, (2) their level of previous work experience and (3) the organizational context. The framework can be regarded as a tool to answer both research questions. First of all, it points out how differently young consultants experience the WLB phenomenon. Second, it clarifies the differences in experience.

The Work Life Quality Framework enriches the literature with a particular focus on young consultants and provides a distinguished view from the generalized statements made in the literature about WLB, the young generation and professionals. Moreover, it complements the research by offering a specific assessment of a particular target group with regard to the manifold WLB concept.

The first orientation refers to the young consultants who just started their career and who do not have previous relevant work experience. We call these young consultants the *Newcomers*. The second orientation represents young consultants who are extremely career oriented and prioritize their work over their life to a higher extent, they are referred to as the *Career Junkies*. The third orientation covers the *Experienced* young consultants and includes those who have previous relevant work experience and are approaching a promotion to senior consultant soon. The fourth orientation, the *Down to Earth,* represents a more general orientation and describes young consultants who are convinced that their quality of life is their own responsibility.

Sub-chapter 5.1 will answer our main research question and is followed by chapter 5.2, which explains the different orientations in detail and elaborates further on the three core elements as previously mentioned. Additionally, the subordinate research question will be discussed in section 5.3. Lastly, sub-chapter 5.4 will relate the findings back to the literature assumptions of chapter 2.5 and examine to what extent these assumptions can be challenged.

5.1   The Individual Work Life Balance Experience

With our main research question we aimed to understand how young professionals understand the multidimensional WLB concept. As our research site for this research project was one of the Big Four consulting firms in Copenhagen, young consultants represent the young professionals. The summary of the findings (see chapter 4.9) already indicated that the young consultants relate very differently to the WLB concept. In general, they do attach value to WLB, but at present it is not their major priority in life. Instead, they emphasize the quality of their lives and relate to happiness when being able to manage their life according to their interest. The WLB phenomenon itself is to some extent regarded as nourished by the social acceptance of the concept. The young consultants question the phenomenon and point out that it implies an irritating ratio of equality.

However, even though we detected congruent elements in the young consultants' experience of the WLB phenomenon, the concept is of such complex nature that no consensus can be reached with regard to one single definition. The literature review already demonstrated the complexity of the term WLB, as the three words, work, life and balance can be related to in

different ways. Throughout our research project, we encountered the major drivers which shape an individual's experience, namely; personality, level of previous work experience as well as the organizational context, the consulting firm in this case. These drivers are in line with our prior understanding as well as the claims in the literature that, besides the individual perception, the context has to be considered (e.g. Lambert, 1990; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Smith & Gardner, 2007). Based on these findings, we developed the Work Life Quality Framework, which facilitates the reader's understanding of the young consultants' orientations towards the manifold WLB concept.

5.2   The Work Life Quality Framework

The introduction of this chapter already described how the Work Life Quality Framework allows us to give an indication of how young consultants experience the phenomenon of WLB. It supports our previous statement (see chapter 2.1), that it is crucial to pay attention to the individual's perception. Figure 1 shows the Work Life Quality Framework and its four distinct orientations which determine how the WLB phenomenon can be experienced in this research project. The personality (driver 1) is represented in the types of orientation, the y-axis represents the young consultants' level of previous work experience (driver 2) and the x-axis their sensitivity to organizational forces (driver 3). The following paragraphs will describe the four orientations as well as clarify the three core drivers.
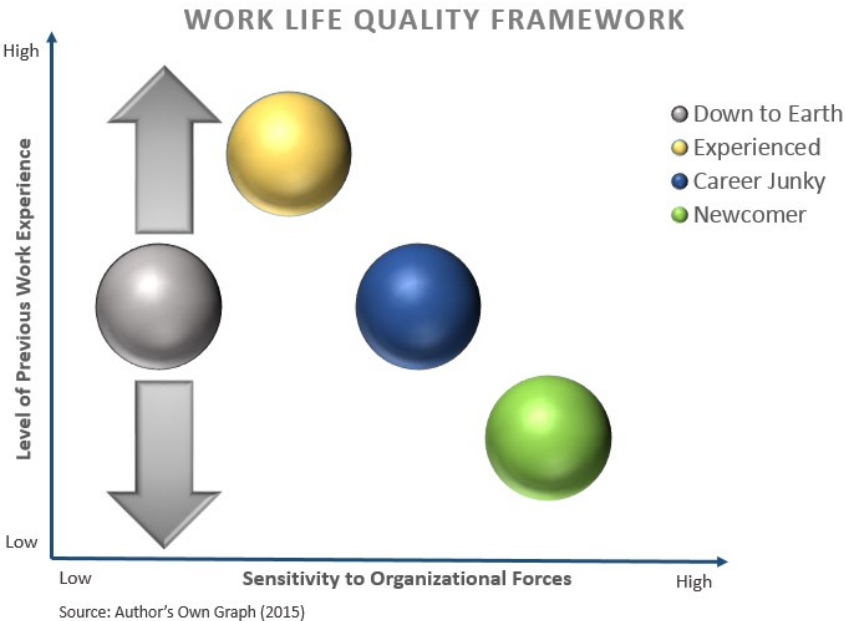

Figure 1. The Work Life Quality Framework: Young Professionals' Orientations towards Work and Life

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Orientation 1: The Newcomer

The first orientation describes young consultants who are in the early beginning of their consulting career. The two interviewees Gustav and Viktor are examples of *Newcomers* and represent this orientation as they are new in this work environment. Both entered the consulting industry seven weeks ago and came straight from university. In line with what Alvesson (2004) states, these university graduates are easy to mold within the organizational culture. They are very excited about the environment as well as the job itself and they are still in the learning process of becoming familiar with procedures, systems and methods. Figure 1 demonstrates their low level of previous work experience as well as their relatively high sensitivity to organizational forces. This orientation stands for young consultants who need to prove themselves and who have to impress their superiors. Therefore, both Gustav and Viktor are relatively sensitive to the *ideal* consultant image as stated by Meriliänen et al. (2004). Moreover, as they are fascinated by the consultant image and excited about the job, they are willing to sacrifice most of their spare time to study at home or to take on more projects. Their boundary is especially blurred due to the fact that they have a highly integrated approach with regard to the people component (Nippert-Eng, 1996), as they also hang out with colleagues outside work. In addition, they refer to WLB as a balance in a sense that a total of 100 percent should be reached, however, the distribution of the 100 percent does not matter, as long as they have some spare time left to enjoy private life.

Orientation 2: The Career Junky

The second orientation characterizes the *Career Junkies,* who are highly sensitive to organizational forces and have a limited level of relevant work experience. They are similar to *workaholics* who, according to Meriliänen et al. (2004), barely make time for activities in their life domain. The *Career Junkies* do have some previous work experience, but perceive their consulting job as an investment in the future. It facilitates the establishment of a network, the development of a good reputation and the rapid expansion of knowledge. Even though they do have certain hobbies and activities which they like to do outside work, they prioritize work over life, as they do not hesitate to invest extra hours in their work when certain unforeseen changes occur. By looking upon the intense working hours as an investment in their future, they legitimize the work intensity by stating that it is only temporary. Oskar, Olaf and Nina are three examples of *Career Junkies* who demonstrate that at present they value their work over life given that they perceive this as the right time to do

so since they are still young and do not have any obligations yet. Therefore, they do not ascribe a high value to their WLB at the moment.

Orientation 3: The Experienced

The *Experienced* orientation consists of the young consultants who have, besides work experience in the consulting firm, also relevant experience from previous jobs. Fredric, Emma, Sofia and Sara belong to the *Experienced* young consultants, as they are acquainted with the work environment, the work intensity and they are more aware of the topic of WLB as they compare their current WLB situation with the situation at their previous jobs. However, this does not necessarily mean that they devote more time to their private life, instead it implies that they distinguish between their work and life domains more clearly as they attach great importance to both domains. Moreover, they do not refer to the amount of hours, but to the quality of the hours instead. They state that although they work an excessive amount of hours, it is the quality of hours which makes them happy. Fredric and Sofia, for example, point out that they work more hours nowadays than in their previous jobs but they still perceive a better WLB then before, this refers to the *satisfaction balance* as described by Greenhaus et al. (2002). The *satisfaction balance* illustrates the importance of being satisfied with both, the work and non-work roles, in order to create happiness. Furthermore, these four young consultants are on the verge of being promoted to senior consultants as they soon reach a job tenure of two years. Based on this career incentive (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011), these young consultants are somewhat pressure-sensitive. Both Emma and Fredric pointed out that they are aware of the image they have within the company and what actions they need to take to receive good feedback and to have the opportunity to promote to the next level in a few months.

Orientation 4: The Down to Earth

The *Down to Earth* orientation covers a broader spectrum and is not related to a certain degree of previous work experience. This orientation encompasses young consultants who ascribe great value to their life in general and who strongly believe in their own responsibility. Examples of interviewees who are *Down to Earth* are Malin and Björn. They mention that the organizational focus on the WLB concept is overrated and point out that WLB is just a buzzword. They object to the statement of Mellner et al. (2014) who argue that the increasing pressure of integrated work and life domains avoid them from achieving a satisfactory WLB. Instead, the opposite can be concluded, since they allow themselves to apply the *temporal*

tactics as presented by Kreiner et al. (2009). The *temporal tactics* can be recognized by the clearly predetermined priorities they set for their life and their self-awareness of how they have to manage both domains in order to maximize the synergy between them. Furthermore, this orientation is characterized by young consultants which are only slightly stress-sensitive and little responsive to organizational pressures or image management in comparison to other orientations (see figure 1).

To sum up, by introducing the Work Life Quality Framework, we explained how the young consultants' WLB experience is shaped by the three core elements (1) personality, (2) level of previous work experience and (3) the forces from the organizational context. We also argue that the forces from the organizational context have a great impact on young consultants' sensitivity to organizational pressures and image. However, the reader should consider the non-generalizability of the framework as it reflects only a snapshot of the interviewees' experience.

5.3   The Differences in Experience

The findings have confirmed the individuality of how people relate to the WLB concept. As presented in the Work Life Quality Framework, the three core elements; (1) personality, (2) level of previous work experience and (3) organizational context, determine how a young consultant experiences the WLB phenomenon. The framework goes beyond the general statement that no consensus in understanding can be reached with regard to the WLB phenomenon and demonstrates the different kinds of WLB orientation that a certain target group can represent. Our subordinate research question is related to this framework, as it aims to illustrate the prevailing forces which account for the differences in WLB experience. The three core drivers can be regarded as the answer to our subordinate research question: *How can the differences in WLB experience be accounted for?*

According to Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011), the way how an employee deals with the WLB concept is affected by personality traits, personal values and attitude. Our research supports this statement and refers to the different personalities in the orientations of the Work Life Quality Framework. The level of previous work experience is another factor which accounts for the differences in how young consultants relate to the WLB concept. Here, we refer to the

level of previous work experience of the young consultants, who belong to the entry-level of the hierarchy in the consulting firm. The literature on knowledge intensive firms (KIF) considers the hierarchical ladder in consultancies as well as the major differences between the levels (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). However, the micro perspective, regarding the differences within a particular level, is unexplored. The last element that explains the differences in experience is the organizational context. The contextual aspect on the WLB concept is pointed out by several scholars, who state that the environmental factors affect an individual's perception on the WLB phenomenon (e.g. Lambert, 1990; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). Based on the findings, we discovered that through the forces from the organizational context, identity work comes through very strongly. The visible measures, the talk, the organizational culture as well as the pressures and image are all determinants of how the company engages in identity regulation. Yet, the literature does not recognize this in relation to WLB. Instead, identity and motivational factors, such as the organizational culture, monetary, non-monetary and career incentives, are looked upon separately. The motivational factors support the perception on the WLB phenomenon (Thompson et al., 1999) and legitimize the work intensity of the consulting job (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Nevertheless, how a company engages in identity regulation is never directly portrayed as a tool to affect an individual's WLB experience.

Moreover, we would like to refer to the concept of *excess ceremoniality* introduced by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007). The concept implies that despite the lack of specific company initiatives, the visible HR and management measures, talk and culture make the young consultants justify the company's engagement in the topic of WLB. As the interviewees mention, the topic of WLB is lived through the talk, and this makes them perceive the company image as being WLB-supportive. The concept of *excess ceremoniality* exemplifies the unequal power relation between the company in the dominating position and the employee in the subordinate position. For instance, while the consultants believe that the company enables them to have the freedom to manage their own schedule, the weekly distributed time sheet ranking the employees' working hours, directs the young consultants to follow the benchmark set by the company. Overall, we found out that the sensitivity varies throughout the orientations. In other words, the orientations highlight the variance in degree how the individual embraces the identity measures of the company. By showing that there are differences in how individuals relate to the identity regulations of the company, we go beyond the simplified consulting image (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Meriliänen et al., 2004).

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5.4 The Uncovering of the Literature Assumptions

The different assumptions the literature holds on the WLB phenomenon fuel the ambiguity of the term WLB. Especially with regard to our target group, young consultants, the contrasting assumptions make it difficult for organizations to apply WLB initiatives effectively. Therefore, we aim to challenge the four prevailing literature assumptions on WLB (see chapter 2.5). However, we would like to highlight that we challenge the literature assumptions based on a limited sample size, therefore we cannot take the significance of the participants' statements for granted.

The first assumption, *young professionals desire to have a WLB,* can be partly confirmed. Our findings have shown that the interviewees have an interest in WLB, as the interviewees expressed their concern for a good life quality. Nevertheless, we think that the expression *desire* is exaggerated, since some young consultants perceive the WLB concept as an overused buzzword. In accordance with Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2011) as well as Sturges and Guest (2004), the young consultants desire to have flexibility in their work as it allows them to integrate both domains. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the interviewees do not refer to the term balance as it indicates an equal ratio in time consumption, which does not reflect their understanding of a good combination of the work and non-work domains.

The second literature assumption refers to the technology development *creating*, according to the literature, *increased pressure*. Davis (2013) explains that the use of mobile devices encourages employees to be constantly available, which enables the workspace to encroach on the non-work domain. Based on our findings, the second assumption can be rejected. The consulting job demands a high degree of availability; however, young consultants like Björn took that into account before entering the consulting business. For them, answering emails and phone calls even during weekends and holidays is not a big cost. Contrasting the increased pressure implied by the literature, young consultants would feel stressed if they were held to reduce the use of mobile devices. In line with the interviewees' argumentation, we claim that the young consultants' generation in general is characterized by the constant availability enabled through mobile devices and fueled by the young consultants' urge to be up-to-date on their environment. Not following this urge could lead to the opposite effect of distraction as the interviewees pointed out.

The third literature assumption argues that *the prevailing flexibility of the professionals in KIFs results in blurred boundaries which tend to cause conflict*. While researchers such as Mellner et al. (2014) and Peters et al. (2009) mention that professionals in KIFs do enjoy the high time-spatial flexibility which reinforces the blurring of the boundaries between the two domains, other scholars point out the danger of flexibility leading to conflicts between the domains (Burchell et al., 2002; Allvin et al., 2012). The latter view is also supported by Ellingsaeter (2003, p. 436) who refers to "flexible hours, but boundless time demands". Our empirical findings do not support the third literature assumption. In fact, all the interviewees ascribed great value to the flexibilty inherent in their job as it allows them to coordinate their work and private lives according to their own will. One interviewee, Sara, emphasizes that it is exactly this flexibilty at work that gives her a balance. This is in line with Campbell Clark (2000), who states that the minimum probability of conflict is also regarded as having a healthy WLB. However, we need to consider that most of the interviewees were not in a relationship, and therefore only responsible for themselves, which reduces the probability of conflicts arising from the social environment (Lambert, 1990).

Based on the literature discussion about boundaries, the tenor is that *the work and life domains are perceived as separate with a clear distinction*. However, our findings confirm that blurred boundaries between work and life establish intertwined segments (Ashforth et al., 2000). The interviewees describe an integration of work and life, due to the flexible work environment and the mobile devices enabling a constant availability. If necessary, they leave work early to do sports or to run errands, and if a project demands it, they take unfinished work home. This integrated situation facilitates the management of their work life and private life and hence, is experienced as a positive development. However, referring back to the literature assumption, the interviewees distinguish between their work and life domains while they are consciously off-work during private activities. Therefore, the two segments are not necessarily perceived as separated, but they still can be distinguished, thus confirming the literature assumption only partly. For instance, some young consultants call their colleagues their friends, while others see them merely as colleagues, this refers to Nippert-Eng's (1996) description of the people component. Moreover, this finding indicates the confusion the term boundary evokes. A boundary implies that a clear cut between work and life exists which is no longer applicable for young professionals nowadays.

6   Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to minimize the discrepancy in the literature regarding the value young professionals ascribe to work life balance (WLB). While some researchers claim that the young generation attaches greater importance to life than to work, other scholars point out that many young professionals still feel attracted to the consulting industry despite the intense working hours. This discrepancy sparked our curiosity to understand how young professionals experience the WLB phenomenon in practice. An additional goal was to suggest a re-conceptualization, as the inherent fuzziness of the WLB concept hinders the researchers to reach a consensus on a single definition. Therefore, a re-conceptualization of WLB could clarify the understanding of how an individual relates to her/his work and life domains, since the word *balance* creates a wrong notion of how to allocate the individual resources.

In accordance with the interpretive paradigm, we aimed to understand what influences the experiences of our eleven interviewees. With the hermeneutic approach we strived to unveil the meaning behind their responses to reach a thick description of how they relate to the WLB phenomenon. By following a critical approach in addition, we unveiled the existing power relations and retained our reflexivity by going back and forth between our own assumptions, the literature and the empirical data.

The main finding of this thesis is that there are different orientations towards the WLB concept within the target group of young consultants. These orientations are shaped by three main drivers; personality, level of previous work experience and organizational context. The results describe for the first time the relevance an individual's work experience has on her/his WLB understanding. For instance, a past experience of work encroaching life resulted in a stronger association with the WLB concept. Overall, this study confirms the individuality of the concept and emphasizes the importance of taking the organizational context into account. A finding regarding boundary management is that the young professionals dot not perceive a clear cut between their work and life domains and see them as integrated. Therefore, the term *boundary* evokes confusion as it indicates a clear separation of the two domains. Another major finding is that the young professionals do not refer to the term WLB as such, but prefer to seek for happiness in both work and life. This finding implies that they do not look upon

the term work life *balance* as a 50:50 ratio and therefore it encourages the idea of a re-conceptualization towards work life *quality.*

6.1 Limitations

Within this research project, three limitations can be identified. The first limitation concerns the non-generalizability of the research project. For instance, the Work Life Quality Framework is only limited to our particular target group and organization in which we conducted the interviews, namely the young professionals and one of the Big Four consulting offices in Copenhagen. The second limitation is the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the orientations, since the extent of the three drivers cannot be seen as static and is subject to change. The third limitation regards the country specific culture, which affects the social and organizational contexts, and ultimately defines how the young professionals relate to WLB.

6.2 Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study reinforces the recommendation to look upon every target group from a micro-perspective. The Work Life Quality Framework provides such a perspective and focuses on young professionals in the consulting industry. We have found that one of the drivers, the organizational context, is constructed and fueled through identity regulation. Therefore, the research on the relation of identity and WLB can extend the current literature. Furthermore, while the concept of boundary management is relevant to WLB, the term *boundary* should be reconsidered when referring to young professionals, as it indicates a clear line which they do not draw in reality. Another implication for future research is to extend and promote the work life *quality* concept in the pop-management-literature in order to supplant the confusing term WLB in practice. The imprudent spread of the WLB concept within companies might project wrong expectations on the individual regarding how to relate to the WLB phenomenon. The results are of direct practical relevance, as the findings have shown that young professionals do not see the necessity of WLB initiatives, instead the company might want to consider investing in self-management trainings. The results have indicated that the interviewees perceived a satisfactory life quality, as long as they were able to coordinate their work and non-work schedules without frictional loss.

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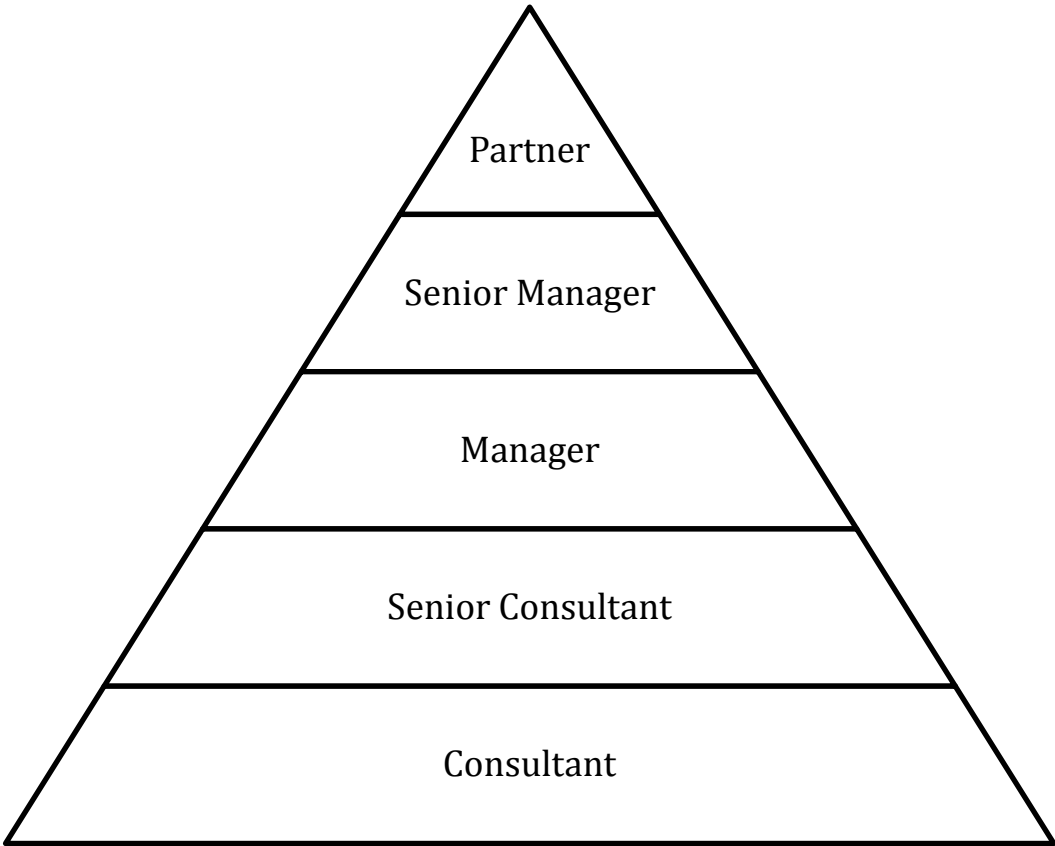
Appendix A

Figure 2. Hierarchical Ladder Consulting Firm

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Name:

Age:

Role:

Interview Rules

- Everything said in the interview will be treated confidentially and anonymized
- If the interviewee has any questions she/he is encouraged to ask them any time throughout the interview
- Ask for approval to record the interview

Introductory Questions

- Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?
- What do you do besides work?
    - How often do you that?
    - Do you make time for it or just do it when possible?
- How long have you been with your company?
- Could you please describe your professional development within your company?
    - How did you enter the company?
    - What are the milestones / stations throughout your career?

General Questions

- Why did you choose to work as a consultant / work in the consulting business?
- How would you describe an ordinary workday?
    - Do you always start working at the same time, or are you flexible with the times?
    - How many hours per week is your contractual working time?
    - Have you worked more or less than the contractual working time the past month?
    - Are you able to get the work done within the normal office hours?

Spatial Boundary Questions

- How much time do you spend on work outside your office hours?

- Are you always available for your work environment (clients, employees)?

- By which means (email, mobile)?

- Have you always been available or did it change throughout your career

Work Life Balance Questions

- What does WLB mean to you/ how do you define WLB?

- Is WLB something you care about / or think of it often?
    - How would you describe your WLB in your current situation?

- Would you say there is a clear-cut boundary between work and your private life?

- Given your experience, to what extent do you think that the topic of WLB has changed throughout the past years?

- To what extent do you think does the social acceptance have an impact on the WLB phenomenon?
    - To what extent do you think WLB is just a fashion?

Employer/Company WLB approach

- How does the company as an employer engage in this topic?
    - What does the company actually do to support WLB?
    - Do you see your company responsible for your WLB or yourself?

- Are you aware of any WLB programs/trainings within your company?
    - If so, in what form?
    - Have you ever make use of those programs?
    - Did you benefit from them, in what way?

Scale Questions

- Scale 1-5: How important is WLB for you, based on your own definition?

- Scale 1-5: In your opinion, how important is your WLB for the company?