

Are Family-Friendly Policies an Effective Recruitment Strategy?

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Abstract

In this study, family-friendly organizational benefits and family-friendly culture are examined with regard to job applicant attraction. A current job-seeking sample comprised of 152 participants was obtained. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four job advertisements, comprised of high or low family-friendly benefits, and high or low family-friendly culture. Results indicated no main effects of family-friendly benefits or cultures. However, significant effects were detected when adding participant sex and into the analysis. Perhaps most notably, in the current job-seeking sample, men appeared to prefer a family-friendly culture and benefits as compared to women. The results of this study suggest that family-friendly policies and benefits are not more attractive to current job seekers when compared to desirable alternatives that are not distinctly family-friendly. Implications and future research are discussed.

Key Words: organizational culture, family-friendly benefits, recruitment

1. Are Family-Friendly Policies an Effective Recruitment Strategy?

What benefits entice job applicants to pursue one job over another? The job recruitment literature says little about what benefits applicants may prefer. While research findings indicate that family-friendly policies are positively related to employee satisfaction and commitment of current employees (Allen, 2001; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brindly, 2005), the recruitment literature says little about whether family-friendly policies draw applicants to the organization. The purpose of the current study is to disentangle the addition of any benefits from the addition of family-friendly benefits in order to examine the recruitment utility of family-friendly policies and benefits.

1.1 Family-Friendly Benefits

With a drastic increase in work-family research (i.e., Eby et al., 2005), more focus has been placed on employee benefits and programs put in place to help employees manage both work and family roles. These benefits can include things such as automobile or transportation subsidies or reimbursements (Miller, 2007) or policies such as flextime, telecommuting, or on-site childcare. The latter group of benefits is often considered to be a part of family-friendly benefits; that is, policies designed to enable employees to better manage both home and work demands (Sutton & Noe, 2005). Family-friendly benefits have been receiving increased attention in the recent past, as evidenced by both popular press (i.e., *Working Mother*) and appearances within academic journals (Eby et al., 2005).

One question that arises out of the increased press on this topic is whether employees or potential employees actually prefer organizations that offer family-friendly benefits. Indeed, when given a choice of additional benefits, over half of survey respondents indicated that they would choose more flexibility in their schedules or additional work-family benefits rather than supplemental insurance or additional job training (Gurchiek, 2008). However, it remains to be seen whether employees actually base employment decisions on the availability of family-friendly benefits. Recruitment researchers have also called for more research in recruitment to examine the influence of recruitment packages including flexible benefits and flexible scheduling on job application decisions (Rynes & Cable, 2002), leaving this a ripe area for continued study. One conclusion expressed throughout work-family literature is the value of family-friendly benefits as a recruitment tool (Friedman, 2001; Nord, Fox, Phoenix, & Viano, 2002). However, little research has rigorously evaluated the organizational attraction and job intentions of applicants based on family-friendly benefits offered. For example, although one article stated that employers believe that work-family benefit programs help recruitment (among other outcomes), no further evaluation evidence was provided regarding work-family policies and recruitment efforts (Friedman, 2001).

A handful of studies have investigated the impact of work-family balance policies and recruitment outcomes. In general, these studies report the availability of family-friendly benefits is one consideration potential employees take into account when assessing their own interest in a particular job. For instance, Casper and Buffardi (2004) indicated that work-family benefits predicted job pursuit intentions, such that applicants indicated higher pursuit intentions towards the organizations offering more work-family benefits. However, a major limitation of the study is that they focused on family-friendly benefits without providing a proper comparison with other, more traditional benefits. Thus, it is not readily possible to disentangle whether their results were due to offering additional benefits in general or from offering additional family-friendly benefits specifically. In other words, perhaps applicants were more attracted to the organization due simply to the addition of any benefits.

Previous research suggests the possibility that family-friendly benefits may not be universally attractive to potential employees; in fact, some suggest that family-friendly benefits are viewed as unattractive or unfair by employees who will not utilize them (Casper, 2007; Martocchio, 2003; Rauthausen, Gonzalez, Clark, & O'Dell, 1998; Piccard, 1997). Given these sources, we are left with two opposing viewpoints: Friedman (2001) concludes that family-friendly recruitment represents a benefit to organizations, while Piccard (1997) claims of resentment of family-friendly policies. As such, the continued empirical study of family-friendly benefits is needed. This leads to the first research question of the paper: Do applicants find family-friendly benefits attractive compared to other desirable benefits?

1.2 Family-Supportive Organizational Culture

Simply offering employees family-friendly benefits may not be enough for employees to feel comfortable utilizing the benefits. Research on utilization of family-friendly benefits has also included a component of workplace support, whether it is from the supervisor or a general family-friendly culture. Research has indicated that when employees perceive a family-friendly organizational culture, they are more likely to utilize available family-friendly benefits, and report higher affective commitment (Allen, 2001; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). Organizational culture refers to basic assumptions, values, and observable artifacts (Schein, 1990). It is possible for an organization to be “family friendly” in its culture by instituting and supporting policies. For example, a number of family-friendly benefits, along with the perceived accessibility of use of these benefits would be evidence of a family-friendly culture. In addition, the values and shared assumptions on the part of employees about the importance of personal work-family balance and the need for flexibility in work schedules to meet those demands is also a crucial part of the organizational culture. Culture is separated from policy in this aspect—the shared assumptions about the use of policies and what results employees anticipate represents the culture, regardless of what the policies are. In other words, employees need to perceive that they are able to use the benefits without fearing negative job consequences.

Two experimental studies explored applicant attraction by manipulating culture through three different career paths (Carless & Wintle, 2007; Honeycutt & Rosen, 1997). Findings of these studies indicated that all participants were more attracted to the flexible career path. The career paths used can be viewed as an indication of organizational culture. By indicating on initial job recruitment material what the organization expects with regard to work and family obligations, applicants gain some insight into the organization's norms and values. The studies suggest that flexible career paths are desirable by most employees, despite differences in personal preferences about work and family priorities. In fact, Carless and Wintle (2007) suggest that flexible career paths will attract recent college graduates, and conclude “that HR policies that respect and value family commitments have universal appeal” (p.400).

Like the previous criticism of focusing only on family-friendly (and no other type of) benefits, the criticism of focusing only on family-friendly culture applies here as well. The previous studies looked at flexible/family-friendly organizational culture in comparison to a traditional culture of the expectation of organizational rewards being based on continued effort and persistence on the part of the employee. However, many other organizational cultures beyond or family-friendly or flexible exist. Perhaps the participants were responding to the fact that the family-friendly culture was more desirable than a traditional reward culture. It may be that other cultures are valuable as well, such as a teamwork-based culture or an employee development culture. To further examine this possibility, this study compares family-friendly culture to another equally attractive organizational culture. This leads to the second research question: Are applicants more attracted a family-friendly organizational culture than a desirable culture that is not family-friendly in nature?

1.3 Gender and Family-Friendly Policies

The work-family research often includes sex as a correlate in empirical research. With the increase in women moving into paid employment, some research has noted a “double shift”; that is, women work for pay at their jobs, and then come home and are still expected to take care of the housework and managing the home, or engaging in childcare (Crawford, 2006). Given these possible reasons for women to have additional care responsibilities, sex and gender roles are often considered as a possible correlate in work-family research.

The empirical research on sex differences regarding family-friendly benefits is scarce. There is some evidence that family-friendly benefits are utilized differently by sex, with women using family-friendly benefits more often than men (Bagilhole, 2006). Evidence also indicates that women are more supportive of family-friendly benefits in the workplace compared to their male counterparts (Baxter, 2000; Bola, 2003). However, the three above mentioned studies regarding sex differences and family-friendly benefits have all been conducted outside of the U.S. Many European countries have notably different parental leave policies at the national level than the U.S. Thus, the applicability of these results to organizations in the U.S. remains unknown.

1.4 Research Questions

The current study aims to further explore the recruitment potential of family-friendly benefits and policies. Given the methodological limitations of previous research on family-friendly benefits, the current study examines three research questions experimentally. First, when compared to other benefits, will applicants prefer family-friendly policies? Secondly, when compared to another attractive organizational culture, do applicants prefer a family-friendly culture? Third, what is the impact of sex on the relationships between organizational benefits and organizational culture on organizational attraction?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample included 156 adults (98 women, 58 men) currently seeking employment through online postings in the Western United States. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 55 years ($M = 36.4$ years). Participants were mostly Caucasian (68%). Other ethnicities reported included Hispanic (6%), African-American (8%), Asian-American (12%), Native American (3%), multiracial (2%), and other (1%). Most participants reported living with a partner or spouse (59%), followed by being single (33%), having a significant other who is not a live-in partner (6%) and being widowed/widower (1%). Number of children ranged from 0 to 7, with most reporting no children (30%), 1 child (19%) or 2 children (15%).

2.2 Procedure

Participants received one of four fabricated job advertisements to view, all containing the same created organization of “PeopleWorks.” The four advertisements manipulated high or low inclusion of family-friendly benefit types and work culture, resulting in four advertisements: 1) High family-friendly benefits with high family-supportive culture; 2) high family-friendly benefits with low family-supportive culture; 3) low family-friendly benefits with high family-friendly culture; or 4) low family-friendly benefits with low family-supportive culture. Participants were recruited using Craigslist.org, an online community board. An online study recruitment advertisement was placed in the employment section to target people actively seeking jobs. The advertisement provided a link to the study's cover letter, the job advertisement, and then the online survey. Upon completing the survey, participants received a completion code and a contact email address. Once participants sent their unique code to the contact email, a \$5 electronic gift certificate was emailed to them for their participation.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Job Advertisements

Participants received one of four fabricated job advertisements to view, all containing the same created organization of “PeopleWorks.” Job advertisements were randomly assigned to each participant. High and low family-friendly benefits were determined by a previous pilot study. The high family-friendly benefits included five items: backup childcare, childcare referrals, eldercare assistance, on-site childcare, and part-time possibilities. The low family-friendly benefits package included four items: on-site fitness center, dental insurance, paid vacation, and paid pension. The second manipulated variable was the organizational culture, which was high or low in family-supportive culture. The high family-friendly culture describes an organization that is concerned with the employee at work and outside of work.

The low family-supportive culture was chosen as an equally desirable culture; however, this organizational culture focuses on the development of the employee in his or her work role. To increase the external validity of promoting the organizational culture through a recruitment advertisement, existing organizational statements were perused and modified slightly to remove the name of the organization. The statement used for the family-supportive organizational condition is as follows:

At PeopleWorks, we are employees...But we are also parents, grandparents, and caregivers of our parents. We know that you don't leave half of yourself at the door when you come to work each day. And that to be truly effective at work, you have to feel truly effective at home. That's why our employees are provided with a diverse array of programs and policies to support them in all their roles...at every stage of their life. To support our culture of work-family balance, here are some of the benefits we offer:

In order to compare the effect of organizational culture, a second organizational culture was found. Again, the text was modified only to remove any identifying organizational information. This second culture is referred to as the low family-supportive culture. The statement used for this condition was as follows:

"We've worked hard to create a corporate culture that is based on trust between our employees and the company," explains PeopleWorks President and CEO, "a culture that rewards innovation, encourages employees to try new things and yet doesn't penalize them for taking chances, and a culture that cares about employees' personal and professional growth." To support our culture of employee investment, we here are some of the benefits we offer:

2.3.2 Perceptions of work-family culture

Allen's (2001) measure of family-supportive organizational perceptions (FSOP) was used as a manipulation check to ensure that the job advertisements designated as low FSOP and the job advertisements designed as high FSOP are perceived as such. The measure was slightly modified to fit the current study. Thus, instead of instructing participants to reflect on their own organization, they were instructed to refer to their perceptions of the "People Works" organization described in the job advertisement. A sample item from this measure is "Employees are given ample opportunity to perform both their job and their personal responsibilities well." A five-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) was used. Reliability for this scale was adequate ($\alpha = .89$).

2.3.3 Perceptions of organizational attractiveness

A five-item measure of organizational attractiveness was used (Casper & Buffardi, 2007). Items were scaled on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item from this scale is "This would be a good company to work for." Reliability for this scale was $\alpha = .91$.

3. Results

Participants' ratings were averaged according to advertisement condition and participant gender (see Table 1). Preliminary analyses included a manipulation check on the FSOP variable. The mean family-supportive rating of participants who viewed a job advertisement with the family-friendly culture was not significantly different than those who viewed the employee investment culture ($t(152) = 4.47, p > .05$), indicating that the manipulation of the culture variable may not have been strong enough. The primary analyses examined participants' overall organizational attraction ratings according to benefit type and work culture. A 2 (high vs. low family-friendly benefit) X 2 (high vs. low family-supportive culture) ANOVA was conducted on mean organizational attraction ratings. Results indicated no significant main effects of benefits ($F(1, 152) = .001, p > .05$), culture ($F(1, 152) = .035, p > .05$), or for an interaction of the two ($F(1, 152) = .441, p > .05$).

To determine whether there were specific gender differences in organizational attraction, a three-way ANOVA was conducted on mean organizational attraction ratings, with benefit type (high vs. low family-friendly) and work culture (high vs. low family-supportive culture) as the within-subjects factors and gender (men vs. women) as the between-subjects factor. No significant main effects or significant simple interactions were found. However, the three-way interaction of benefit type, culture, and sex was significant ($F(1, 143) = 3.274, p < .05$). To further probe this interaction, two separate 2 X 2 ANOVAs were conducted using male and female respondents alone. An analysis of organizational attraction by only male respondents revealed a significant interaction of benefit type by work culture, ($F(1, 51) = 8.07, p < .01$). The interaction is graphed in Figure 1.

Examining the graph reveals that within the family-friendly culture condition, male participants who also viewed family-friendly benefits rated the organization as more attractive than those who viewed the nonspecific benefits. However, males in the employee investment culture condition who viewed family-friendly benefits rated lower organizational attraction as compared to those who viewed the nonspecific benefits. An analysis of organizational attraction by only female respondents revealed no main effects for benefit type ($F(1, 90) = .00, p > .05$) or culture ($F(1, 90) = .01, p > .05$) and no significant interaction between the two ($F(90) = 2.51, p > .05$). Unlike men, women's organizational attraction did not differ with regard to benefit type or work culture. However, the interaction is graphed for comparison to the male respondents.

4. Discussion

4.1 Effects of Benefit Type

The results of the study indicate that family-friendly benefits do not appear to be more attractive when compared to a comparable benefits package low in family-friendly benefits. The purpose of this research was to study the applicant attraction of family-friendly benefits and policies. This research controls for shortcomings of some previous research, and questions some conclusions made previously indicating that family-friendly benefits increase attraction (Casper & Buffardi, 2004; Friedman, 2001).

Overall, the results did not support the idea that potential applicants have a strong preference for benefit type or culture. That is, applicants were not drawn to the family-friendly benefits as compared to another desirable organizational culture, and applicants did not prefer family-friendly benefits as compared to other benefits. The current study adds to a small body of research that examines family-friendly or flexible benefits, and the current study concludes that these benefits appear to have little effect on employee or applicant attitudes.

4.2 Effects of Organizational Culture

Organizational culture, particularly family-friendly organizational culture, has been empirically shown to correlate with employee attitudes (i.e., Allen, 2001; Eby et al., 2005). In this study of potential job applicants, there were no main effects of culture organizational attraction. That is, neither culture was deemed to be more attractive to jobseekers than the other. The lack of preference for organizational culture is interesting. Perhaps organizational culture is more crucial to existing employees who see the effects of culture on a daily basis. Along those lines, it is possible the organizational culture manipulation was not exhibited strongly enough on the recruitment material, and applicants did not fully appreciate this information. This explanation is supported by the failure of the manipulation check in the sample. Participants in this sample did not report perceiving significantly different family-supportive culture in the different advertisements, even though pilot tests indicated a difference in family-supportive perception.

4.3 Sex and Gender

Interestingly, a significant 3-way interaction in organizational attraction was detected. Further probing indicated differences between males and females such that when men viewed the family-friendly culture, they had higher job pursuit intentions when also viewing family-friendly benefits. However, in the employee investment culture, the men had higher job pursuit intentions when viewing the nonspecific benefits package. Intuitively, the pattern seen in men makes sense—attraction is highest when culture and benefit type “match.” That is, in the family-friendly culture condition, men reported higher organizational attraction when family-friendly benefits were also offered. In the employee investment condition, men reported higher organizational attraction when the nonspecific benefits were offered. It seems reasonable that respondents reported higher attraction when there was congruence between culture and benefit type. However, this relationship was not seen in women. No discernible effects of culture, benefit type, or an interaction between the two were found within the sample of current job-seeking women.

The sex differences are intriguing. Though the interactions for the female sample were not significant, the graphed interaction looked to be counter to the male sample. The question of why women were not especially attracted to the family-friendly culture with family-friendly benefits is rather interesting. Though other studies have found that females tended to endorse family-friendly policies more than men (Baxter, 2000; Bola, 2003), the current data does not support this conclusion. Of note, the previous studies finding females preferring family-friendly policies were conducted outside the United States, however, so there may be national differences.

It is possible the U.S. females were more interested in organizations promoting employee development, rather than family-friendly culture, as a shift away from women's historical roles as primary family caregivers. Or, perhaps gender roles in the U.S. are changing such that women and men are beginning to take more equal parts in childcare. If this is the case, it may be that the pendulum is swinging for women from focus on mother and family to focus on career and work. A final postulation is that this is a method for work-family balance—women want both a satisfying work experience (such as the one suggested in the low family-friendly culture that instead focused on employee development) as well as some consideration for family needs (the family-friendly policies). Perhaps the relationships we see within the job-seeking females is the “best of both worlds” rather than a match between culture and benefit type. Whatever the reason, this would be a fruitful area for future study.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, limitations of the research methodology exist. Limited funding resulted in a modest sample size of around 150 current job-seekers. After dividing the sample size by the condition of advertisement viewed, there were as few as 29 participants per cell in the 2 X 2 analyses, and even fewer in the three way interactions.

Secondly, a ceiling effect existed in attraction and job-pursuit intentions, leaving little variance to be explained. Regarding this, the current economic state should be considered. Currently, the U.S. is in an era of job cuts and high unemployment, compared to a few years ago when the previous research was conducted. This is a change from even a few years ago, when the economy was such that some companies were understaffed and trying to actively recruit employees (Rynes & Cable, 2003) in a “war for talent” that was expected to continue (Collins & Han, 2004, p. 685). Perhaps benefits and organizational culture are less important when simply finding a job is an achievement in itself. Different economic states could be an important variable to examine, and may be one of the reasons that the current findings did not replicate previous research (i.e., Carless & Wintle, 2007; Casper & Buffardi, 2004).

In addition, the flexibility variables used in previous research (i.e., Carless & Wintle, 2007) were not used in this study because of the lack of agreement of whether the flexibility variables should be considered family-friendly. Further probing of how benefits are framed, such as “flexible” versus “family-friendly” may be another area to further explore. It may be that the framing of these benefits is important, and future research could include the flexibility benefits in both the nonspecific benefits as well as family-friendly benefits packages. It is likely that when framed with other family-friendly benefits, the flexibility benefits will be considered a family-friendly benefit, but when framed with nonspecific benefits, they may not be seen as solely family-friendly.

4.5 Contributions

This is the first research to examine comparable worth of benefits. This alone can be useful information to organizations and recruiters. The practical implication is simple: If applicants perceive one benefit as of more value than another, but both benefits incur the same cost to the organization, promoting the more “valuable” benefit may help attract potential employees. In addition, organizations that allow employee choice in benefits packages may want to consider these perceptions of equal value. Perceptions of injustice, despite objective fairness, may exist in organizations. In fact, one article describes the importance of maintaining impressions of organizational justice in addition to fair procedures (Greenberg, Bies, & Eskew, 1991). By proactively designing benefits packages with a concern for perceived worth as well as actual cost, organizations may be able to satisfy employees' justice needs. In addition, Greenberg et al. argue that the perception of an organizations' fairness impacts recruitment, suggesting that perceived fairness is important to potential employees as well as current employees.

The current study also adds to the literature by controlling for limitations in previous research by matching benefits and culture. This is a major contribution of the research design, as this research is able to parse apart effects of benefit type versus benefit number. In addition, an equally attractive organizational culture was used as the comparison for family-friendly culture so that again, type of culture could be isolated.

In conclusion, the current study did not find that family-friendly benefits or culture were more desirable to job seekers when compared to attractive alternatives, contrary to previous findings. This data suggests that family-friendly benefits are not the most desirable to jobseekers, though previous research suggests that family-friendly policies are important to incumbents.

The finding that family-friendly policies and benefits are not universally appealing can allow job recruiters and organizations to focus on other information in recruitment material rather than focusing on family-friendly benefits, which can be addressed after employees are in the organization.

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Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations by Ad and Sex on Organizational Attraction

Ad	N	M	SD
High Family-Friendly Benefit/High Family-Friendly Culture			
Men	16	4.38	.48
Women	30	4.21	.90
High Family-Friendly Benefits/Low Family-Friendly Culture			
Men	14	3.88	.63
Women	21	4.44	.43
Low Family-Friendly Benefits/High Family-Friendly Culture			
Men	9	3.98	.42
Women	23	4.45	.63
Low Family-Friendly Benefits/Low Family-Friendly Culture			
Men	12	4.33	.50
Women	16	4.20	.61

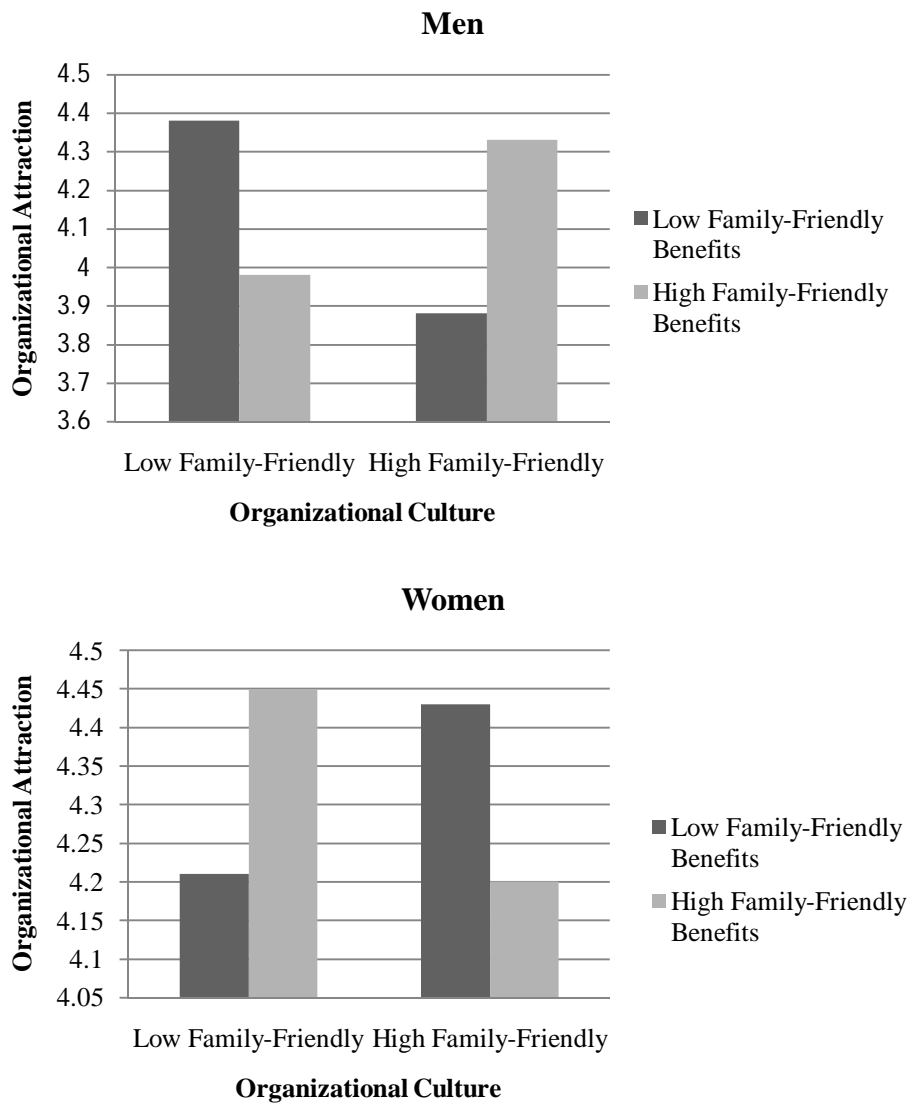


Figure 1: Three-way interaction of benefit type, culture type, and sex on organizational attraction.