

## **How Can HRM Help Organizations Build the Supportive “Work-Life/family” Balance Culture? <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Many researchers have shown that there is a positive relation between the work-life/family balance policies and employees' performance in organizations. However, the gap between the need for these policies and the reality in most workplaces remains disturbingly wide. This paper argues that supportive organizational work-life culture, which includes managerial support, career consequences, organizational time demand, gender related perception and co-workers' support, is important for the successful implementation of WLB programs. Only if HRM department get the support from top management and the assistance from supervisors and managers, begin to enhance women's positions, establish new performance evaluation methods, and consider the fairness between co-workers, can the supportive organizational work-life/family culture be formed and implemented.*

**Key words:** work-life/family balance, organizational culture, Human resource management(HRM), flexibility

### **1. Introduction**

There are significant changes in the workplace since the 1990s. The traditional employment contract was changed by corporate downsizing and the increasing use of part-time and temporary workers (Glass & Finley, 2002). Furthermore, more and more women in the labour force has led to the intensification of conflict between work and family in the lives of many individuals (Poelmans & Sshibzada, 2004). So, many organizations are enhancing its human resource policies and practices that address work/life balance (WLB) to help their employees cope with their time-pressured lives and increase the organization's efforts to recruit, retain, and motivate the valued employees in a highly competitive market (De Ciec et al., 2005; Nord et al, 2002; Kotowska et al, 2010).

WLB strategies have been defined as those that enhance the autonomy of workers in the process of co-ordinating and integrating work and non-work aspects of their lives (Felstead et al., 2002). Employees are offering a range of WLB programs to employees, such as job sharing, telecommuting, parental leave, flextime, parental leave, return-to-work options, resource and referral services, and on-site childcare (Felstead et al., 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was financed by the social science key project of Southwest University “The Research about the Constructing of Modern University system”, project No.12XDSKZ009.

Thompson and Prottas indicate (2006) that conflicts between competing work and family demands can have negative effects at the workplace, at home and on the individual, while WLB programs can reduce the stress associated with balancing multiple roles (Barneet, 1999; Thompson & Prottas, 2006). However, there is also evidence that many employees are not taking advantage of these benefits. A study of the Engineers in Fortune 100 Company found that they were reluctant to use WLB programs due to fears of negative career consequences (Perlow, 1995). Furthermore, some managers may not allow employees to participate or apply these policies (Thompson et al., 1999). Thus, it is quite clear that despite formal WLB policies and programs designed to help employees balance work and family, low usage rates may undermine the programs' effectiveness.

So this paper argues that it is organizational culture that significantly affects the employees' utilization of WFL programs and addresses the question: how HRM can do to help employees to utilize those programs? Thus this paper includes three parts: the first part is literature review which will analyze the impacts of WLB programs on the organization and employees' performance, and then this paper will discuss the culture dimensions that impact the employees' adaptation of WFL programs, which include the managerial support, career consequence, organizational time expectation, gender related perception, and co-worker support. The second part is followed by offering some suggestion to HRM to enhance the utilization of WFB programs. Finally, the conclusion, accompanied direction for future research will be stated.

## ***2. The dimensions of a supportive work-life/family culture*** **(Literature review)**

WLB strategy is become more and more popular for organization to retain and motivate talent pool and improve the organizational performance, since WLB has the positive impact on the profitability and employees well-being (Thompson & Prottas, 2006; Canivet et al, 2010).

### **2.1 WLB Programs and organizational benefits**

Several studies have shown that organizations with extensive WFB programs educe organizational citizenship behaviour (Bragger et al., 2005) and report higher levels of perceived organizational performance (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000; Canivet et al, 2010) and productivity (Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Eaton, 2001). Since conflicts between work and family life may lead to employee turnover and withdrawal, WLB programs can help organizations retain valuable workers they have recruited and trained by reducing those conflicts and decrease other withdrawal behaviors that diminish the value of investments in employees, such as reduced work effort, lateness, and absenteeism (Konrad & Mangel, 2000). Although Lobel (1999) states that providing on-site childcare has close relation with a variety of employees' positive attitudinal outcomes, not all policies seem to have a positive impact on company profits (Meyer et al., 2001). Meyer et al. found (2001) that profitability was positively related to the amount of adoption WLB programs and the percentage of employees working at home, while negatively related to employee usage of job sharing and on-site childcare. Konrad and Mangel' study (2000) of 195 firms indicated that WLB programs had a stronger positive impact on productivity when women comprised a larger percentage of the workforce and when a higher percentage of professionals were employed.

### **2.2 WLB programs and employees' well-being**

Because WLB programs are intended to facilitate employees to integrate and manage their work and family responsibilities (De Cieci et al., 2005), employees of organizations that offer such benefits can enjoy greater job, family, and life satisfaction and have less intention to quit than employees of organizations that do not (Rayman et al., 1999). Employees could also experience lower levels of stress, work– family conflict, and higher levels of positive output between work and family (Thompson & Prottas, 2006; Glass & Finley, 2002; Rupert et al, 2009 )

However, O'Driscoll et al. (2003) and Thompson et al. (2004) found that there is no positive relation between the availability of formal organizational policies and employee outcomes such as work–family conflict, absenteeism, and productivity, while other factors are even more important for reducing work– family conflict or stress and enhancing performance, such as having supportive colleagues and managers as well as the perception on the part of the employees that they can use these policies without fearing negative job or career consequences (Thompson et al., 1999; Thompson & Prottas, 2006; Allen, 2001; Council of Economic Advisers, 2010). This problem addresses the role of supportive organizational culture in the effective implementation and adaptation of WBL program.

### **2.3 The dimensions of a supportive organizational work-/family culture**

According to Thompson et al. (1999), a work-/family culture is defined as “the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives’ (p. 394). A supportive work–family culture increases the likelihood that employees will feel comfortable using family-friendly benefits like flextime, as they are less likely to worry about possible negative career consequences (Allen, 2001; ). Thompson et al. distinguished (1999) three dimensions in the work-family culture: managerial support, career consequences and organizational time demands, while McDonald et al. (2004) developed another two dimensions: gender related perception and co-worker support. This paper argues that these dimensions of organizational culture can explain the provision-utilization gap of WLB programs. And each of these elements will be discussed as follow:

#### **2.3.1 Managerial support**

The first component of work-family culture is managerial support, which emphasizes on managers and supervisors support or their sensitivity to employees’ family responsibility (Thomson et al., 1999; McDonald et al., 2004). Managers or supervisors play an important role in the effectiveness of WLB programs because they may encourage employees to participate or discourage employees from participating WLB programs (Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998) or because employees’ efforts of integrating their work and lives will be undermined by them to reinforce certain cultural norms (Thomson et al., 1999). Allen (2001) indicates a strong relation between supervisor support and family-supportive work environments, that means employees whose supervisors supported their efforts to balance work and family were less likely to experience work-family conflicts (Thompson & Prottas, 2006 ) and will be more inclined to take up available work-life/family programs (McDonald et al., 2004 ).

Furthermore, managerial factors, such as their attitudes and resistance, can be regarded as the barriers to the development and implementation of WLB programs (De Ciec et al., 2005). For example, employers are most likely to offer family-friendly work practices to employees with high skills levels or in whom they have invested training or other resources (Gray & Tudball, 2003). Many employees view the support of lower level managers as being even more critical because it is the first-line supervisors of program participants whose day-to-day work is most impacted by work-life/family programs (Nord et al., 2002). While compared with other occupation, the people who are in the managerial and professional position are more likely to have access to family-friendly work programs (Gray & Tudball, 2003).

#### **2.3.2 Career consequences**

Another component of work-family culture is career consequences, which concerns the perception of negative career development opportunities as a consequence of utilizing WLB programs or spending time in family-related activities (Thomson et al., 1999; McDonald et al., 2004). Thomson et al states that participation in WLB programs makes an employee ‘less visible’ at work, which, in turn, may form the obstacle for their career development and promotion prospects (Campbell Clark, 2000). Furthermore, employees using WLB programs may be perceived as less committed to their organization and work (Allen, 2001), which may also jeopardize their career development. More recently, Kirby and Krone (2002) found that working part-time is incompatible with promotion and access to a range of higher status male-dominated occupations, and Junor’s study shows (1998) that the proportion of female part-time employees categorized as “unprompted” was 96.7 percent and this data was similar for male part-time employees. The negative career consequences can explain the reason why many of full-time women with dependents still prefer to stay in jobs with the same employment conditions, status and level of responsibility, while reduce their hours to accommodate family commitments, rather than switch to jobs in the part-time sector of the labour market (McDonald et al., 2004).

#### **2.3.3 Organizational time demands**

The third dimension, organizational time demands, refers to norms concerning the number of hours which employees are supposed to devote to work or work-related activities (Lobel & Kossek, 1996). Workplaces image the ideal worker as somebody who starts to work in early adulthood and continues for forty years uninterrupted, taking no time off for child bearing or child rearing, supported by a spouse or family member who takes primary responsibility or family and community (Bailyn, Drago & Kochan, 2001).

Pocock et al. (2001) also suggest that the nature of work and career paths demand long hours as a signal of organizational commitment, productivity and motivation for advancement. However, although working long hours reflects job involvement, commitment and productivity, on the other hand, such behaviour is an obstacle to meeting family requirements (Bailyn, 1997; Joyce, 2010.), which is easily to evoke the time-based conflict. Time based conflicts occur when time stresses in one role, such as worker, make it difficult to accommodate with expectations in the other role, such as mother. These conflicts can impair employees' well-being in different domains of life (Allen et al., 2000).

### **2.3.4 Gender related perception**

Gender-related perception may also contribute to the low adaptation of work-life/family policies in many organizations (McDonald et al., 2004). That is, although work-life/family policies are supposedly gender-neutral, in reality they revolve around facilitating the working conditions of women (Strachan & Burgess, 1998). Indeed, according to Charlesworth (1997), women with dependent children have been the largest demographic group to use WLB programs. And because larger numbers of women utilize WLB programs, women may be seen as deficient and needing help (Liff & Cameron, 1997). In other words, because women have more personal experience than men in dealing with WLB issues and are more likely than men to take priority (Bailyn, Drago & Kochan, 2001; Canivet et al, 2010). Furthermore, gender assumptions can explain the significant dissimilar between men and women (Swanberg, 2004). As Haas et al (2002) and Swanberg (2004) state that men's identification as breadwinner and their job characteristics (e.g. work hours) affect their involvement in WLB programs. However, men as well as women are seeking a better balance between their work, family and community lives (Charlesworth, Campbell & Probert, 2002) and they all have equal domestic responsibility, such as child-caring, older caring and breadwinning in dual –earner (Barneet, 1999; Canivet et al, 2010 ).

### **2.3.5 Co-worker support**

The final component is co-worker support, which was emphasized by Hegtvedt et al. (2002) that the level of co-worker supportiveness had the greatest influence on employee resentment in relation to the use of work-life/family policies. Based on organizational justice theories, Haar and Spell (2003) found that resentment from some employees may contribute to a work environment where the utilization of work-life/family policies is not encouraged. This point was supported by Kirby and Krone (2002) and they state that the resentment from co-workers often make women who take WLB programs to balance “use” versus “abuse” so as not to be seen, and treated, as a less committed worker Comparing with employees with children, childless workers are expected to work longer hours, take assignments involving travel and are provided fewer opportunities to take advantage of flexible work arrangements (Picard, 1997). Furthermore, co-workers' support were positively related to job, family, and life satisfaction as well as positive balance between job and family, and negatively related to stress, intentions to quit, and work-to-family conflicts (Thompson & Prottas, 2006; APA, 2010)

WLB programs can provide substantial benefits to both employees and organizations, but their success depends significantly on how supportive the organizational culture is toward WLB or how supportive individual supervisors and co-workers are (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). However, an organization's offering family-friendly work-practices does not necessarily mean that all employees will be allowed to, or feel able to, take advantages of such opportunities (Gray & Tudball, 2003). Many employees may not utilize these policies because they believe that using them might jeopardize their job security, work responsibility, or chances for promotion (Thompson et al., 1999). While employers may make WLB programs available to some but not all employees which also undermine the effectiveness of these policies. So, it is quite clear that a supportive organizational culture plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of those policies and HR department should help organization to establish supportive work-family/life culture.

## ***3. The suggestions of establishing a supportive work-family/life culture***

Now that organizations have already invest time, money and energy in developing and implementing work-life/family programs in order to get the maximize productivity output, they should establish a supportive work-family/life culture to encourage employees adapt these policies and programs.

Actually, organizational culture change is a hard process, and the establishment of supportive work-family/life culture is affected by factors from social norms and identification (Haas et al., 2002), which make it even more difficult and complicate. HRM, as an important part in strategy implementation, should play an key role in building a supportive work-family/life culture.

**First and foremost**, HRM department should make executive and organizational leaders aware of the importance of organizational culture in the implementation of WLB policies. Organization' leaders can show their commitment to the WLB programs by allocating needed resources (Rayman et al., 1999). Top management support can give employees the security they need to commit themselves to the effort since it encourages participation and input, and fosters the belief that risk-taking will be rewarded (Rayman et al., 1999). Human resource managers may need to serve as communication channel between users of the programs and top management (Nord et al., 2002). They should communicate with high-level mangers about how the new programs are affecting employees' life and organizational performance, and encourage them to support more to the WLB programs.

**Second, supervisors and line managers** should be cautioned that some of their traditional practices may undermine the effectiveness of WLB programs (Nord et al., 2002). So, HRM should offer new training for them to accept the change in the workforce and the new job arrangement, by which to help managers and supervisors overcome difficulties to underutilize work/life options or devalue the contributions or commitment of flextime employees (Nord et al., 2002), then to change their attitudes towards the different employees with gender, position and family responsibility. Only when organizational management respects employees' needs by balancing their work and family, respect demands from all employees (Glass & Finley, 2002), can the WLB programs achieve the effectiveness and utilization. In addition, HR department should offer Line managers some assistance in adapting their managerial approaches to the new work arrangements (Nord, 2002).

**Third, women's position** should be enhanced in the organization. Although work and family are not simply women's issues, the reality is that women often have more personal experience than men in dealing with work-life/family issues and are more likely than men to consider them (Bailyn et al., 2001; Council of Economic Advisers, 2010 ). Furthermore, Foley et al.'s study (2006) found that supervisors provided more family support to subordinates who were similar in either gender or race than to those subordinates who were dissimilar. In addition, family-supportive supervision was highest when subordinates were similar to supervisors in both gender and race (Foley et al., 2006; Council of Economic Advisers, 2010).

**Then, new performance evaluation methods** should be established by HRM department. In order for the effective utilization of WLB programs, the assumption that "a worker out of sight is a worker out of control" prevails in many organizations must be changed (Rayman et al., 1999), which demand the new performance evaluation methods. In other words, the organization should establish the performance based assessment which measure employees' contribution and commitment is by performance rather than "face time" (Glass & Finley, 2002). So, organization should loosen managerial control while fostering high productivity through outcome-oriented evaluation for their employees (Glass & Finley, 2002). Furthermore, new evaluation procedures may be needed to reflect alterations among different kinds of contracts, concerning not only the short-term evaluations of employees, but overall career paths as well (Nord et al, 2002)

**Last but not the least, HR department should make these programs** to be perceived as fair by both users and non-users, consideration must be taken to avoid subtle penalties with respect to task assignments, compensation and promotion (Nord et al, 2001). So, managers and supervisors should share control and responsibility of WLB programs with employees. Dialogue among employees in the workplace is critical to overcoming both subtle resistance among supervisors and resentment of (Bailyn et al., 2001) and to benefit the establishment of supportive work-family/life programs. Only by motivate employees in efforts to change the prevailing workplace culture, will fear of using part-time or flexible work options will hurt one's career prospective be overcome (Bailyn et al., 2001).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although there is a positive relationship between the implementation of WLB programs and organizational performance and employees' well-being, those programs' under-utilization and low usage show that un-supportive organizational culture form the barrier for the desirable outcomes of commitment and productivity. So, this paper examines the five dimensions of organizational culture: managerial support, career consequences, organizational time demand, gender related perception and co-workers' support, and argues that supportive work-family/life culture is important for the successful implementation of WLB programs. HRM department should help organization to establish supportive organizational culture, such as the support from top management, the assistance to supervisors and managers, enhancement of women's positions, the establishment of the new performance evaluation methods, the consideration of fairness and co-workers. In all, only by the establishment of a supportive work-family/life culture, can organization and employees capitalize on the implementation of WLB programs.

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