



Explanations for the provision-utilisation gap in work-life policy

Work-life policy

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Abstract

Purpose – Organisational work-life policies and programs allow employees to have greater control over how, when and where they work but these policies are often under-utilised, particularly by men and career-oriented employees. In what is largely an atheoretical area of literature, the paper aims to theoretically integrate the empirical literature related to the uptake of organisational work-life policies.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper links three related areas of literature: the associations between work-life policies and individual/organisational outcomes; explanations for the low uptake of work-life policies in many organisations; and preliminary studies which have explored organisational culture and its relationship to work-life policies. These literatures are integrated to develop a five-dimensional construct, “organisational work-life culture”, for testing in future research.

Findings – It is suggested that the following five dimensions underlie this aspect of organisational life: lack of managerial support for work-life balance; perceptions of negative career consequences; organisational time expectations; the gendered nature of policy utilisation; and perceptions of unfairness by employees with limited non-work responsibilities.

Practical implications – The development and validation of the organisational work-life culture construct requires further research and may result in specific organisational strategies and policies which address the barriers to work-life policy utilisation.

Originality/value – Based on existing empirical evidence, the paper suggests an original theoretical proposition: that organisational work-life culture is underpinned by five dimensions and explains much of the provision-utilisation gap in work-life policy.

Keywords Hours of work, Organizational culture, Careers, Part time workers, Gender

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Three major types of work-life[1] policies have been created to assist employees in balancing their work and non-work lives. These are:

- (1) flexible work options (e.g. part-time work, flexible hours arrangements);
- (2) specialized leave policies (e.g. parental leave, career break schemes); and
- (3) dependent care benefits (e.g. subsidized childcare, child care referral) (Morgan and Milliken, 1992; Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002).

Although the use of organisational work-life programs has been shown to reduce work-family conflict (Allen, 2001; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994; Thiede and Ganster, 1995) and subsequently improve life satisfaction and well-being (Frone *et al.*, 1997; Thomas and Ganster, 1995), even the availability of extensive and generous



work-life policies does not necessarily result in widespread utilisation by employees (Fried, 1998; Hochschild and Machung, 1997).

Low uptake rates of available work-life programs are problematic at the level of both employee and organisation. With increasing proportions of women entering paid employment and greater numbers of employees having significant elder care responsibilities (Department of Workplace Relations and Small Business, 1998; Hoskins, 1996), a substantial proportion of employees are attempting to balance work and non-work responsibilities, and yet many are not taking advantage of programs which were designed to facilitate this blend. The potential difficulties associated with unbalanced roles, such as work-family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Grover and Crooker, 1995; Raabe and Gessner, 1988; Thiede and Ganster, 1995), therefore compel an understanding of why many employees are reluctant to use available programs. Further, the under-utilisation of work-life policies has potential implications for fertility levels in developed countries. There is evidence, for example, that where jobs built around the breadwinner model remain intact, many women delay or abandon childbirth in the belief that employment security and promotion opportunities would be endangered following the birth of a child (Barnes, 2001; Drago *et al.*, 2002; Varner and Drago, 2001). McDonald (2000) suggests fertility is lowest in countries where an "institutional lag" (i.e. where institutions have not adapted to changing work-family circumstances) is most severe. A dedicated effort to reduce this institutional lag could contribute to the development of a national response to arrest or reverse declining fertility and the high ratio of older, dependent adults to working-age adults that results. Efforts in this regard may include the elimination of barriers to the utilisation of programs which facilitate care-giving, thereby contributing to slowing the continuing fertility decline in developed countries. Thus, the issue of work-life policy uptake has far-reaching consequences, and is the focus of this paper.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical and empirical literature demonstrating the impacts of work-life policies on both organisations and employees. It then identifies several explanations found in the recent literature which account for why some employees do not utilise the work-life programs that are made available to them. We attempt to theoretically integrate these empirical explanations as five dimensions of the construct "organisational work-life culture", and propose that this model be tested in future research.

How work-life policies impact on organisations

Research has suggested that the provision of alternative work practices may benefit organisations by improving the retention or recruitment of skilled women (Hunt, 1993; National Council of Jewish Women, 1993; Raabe, 1990; Wolcott, 1991), reducing absenteeism (Baltes *et al.*, 1999; Russell, 1993; Wolcott, 1993), increasing productivity (Hunt, 1993), and reducing hiring and retraining costs (Labich, 1991; National Council of Jewish Women, 1993). As such, making a range of work-life programs available has been argued to benefit organisations financially, a position that has become known as the "business case for equality" (Dickens, 1999).

Assessing the impact of work-life policy provision on an organisation's "bottom line" is often seen as an important element in the evaluation of costs versus benefits of such policies. In relation to turnover, for example, Abbott *et al.* (1996) demonstrated that the total turnover cost for exit and replacement of a second- or third-year female

manager in Australia was conservatively \$75,000. Similarly, a leading Sydney law firm estimated that it would cost approximately \$80,000 to replace a solicitor with two years' experience who did not return from maternity leave, but only \$15,000 to pay 12 weeks maternity leave and a three-week budget-free period on return to work (Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002). As a result, work-life policies which help to reduce these turnover costs, such as part-time work, paid maternity leave and flexible scheduling, are often keenly pursued by organisations, and the relationship between the aims and impacts of these policies has some empirical support. Schwartz (1989) contends that a part-time return to work following childbirth enables women to maintain responsibility for critical aspects of their jobs, keeps them in touch with the changes constantly occurring at the workplace and in the job itself, reduces stress and fatigue, and enhances company loyalty. Solihull and McRae (1994) found that the lack of availability of part-time work influenced mothers' decisions to seek a different employer. The distinction between premise and practice in terms of the "availability" of part-time work, however, especially for managers, is particularly important and will be addressed later. Research also consistently confirms that women with greater flexibility in start and finish times work longer into pregnancy and return to work sooner following childbirth (Hofferth, 1996; Melbourne Business School, 1998; National Council of Jewish Women, 1993).

Despite the examples of demonstrable benefits to organisations, systematic evaluations of the impacts of work-life policy are far from commonplace (Glass and Finley, 2002; Mattis, 1990). Glass and Finley (2002) suggest that few evaluations are conducted because of difficulties conceptualising employer "costs" and "benefits". For example, costs may involve the direct expense of implementing the policies or indirect costs in loss of managerial oversight. Benefits can be measured as reduced absenteeism or turnover, or increased productivity, commitment or loyalty. Further, a study by Mattis (1990) revealed that one of the reasons the majority of companies had not performed analyses of their work-life programs was that it was too difficult for a company with a comprehensive package of policies to discern the costs and benefits of individual policies. Finally, a review of organisational work-family policy by Russell and Bourke (1999) suggests the adoption of work-family approaches is rather *ad hoc*, with little evidence of systematic approaches to the implementation of such policies. In summary, however, the evidence which is available suggests that the provision of work-life policies provides measurable benefits for organisations.

How work-life policies impact on employees

Aside from their impact on organisations, there is also substantial evidence that work-life provisions benefit employees by assisting them to balance work and non-work commitments. Empirically, participation in work-life programs have been found to increase employees' organisational commitment (Allen, 2001; Russell, 1993), morale (McC Campbell, 1996) and job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Baltes *et al.*, 1999; Bedeian *et al.*, 1988). Bond *et al.* (1998) note that because job stress and lack of work-family balance creates family problems, such as social dysfunction, health problems and demand on community services, these types of potential savings add a societal rationale for implementing such policies, above and beyond the justification for business savings alone. Increased perceptions of control related to the use of work-life policies have also been found to lead to a reduction in personal stressors, indirectly

improving the attitude, mental health and physical health of workers (Thiede and Ganster, 1995).

Greenhaus *et al.* (2003) recently distinguished between three types of work-family balance:

- (1) time balance (equal time devoted to work and family);
- (2) involvement balance (equal involvement in work and family); and
- (3) satisfaction balance (equal satisfaction with work and family).

The authors found that employees who were either balanced in each of these areas or unbalanced in favour of the family experienced a higher quality of life than those who were unbalanced in favour of work (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003). Although Greenhaus *et al.* (2003) do not suggest how the use of work-life programs may impact on these relationships, programs which genuinely allow employees to spend more time and be more involved at home appear likely to contribute to individual well-being.

Several theoretical propositions have been espoused which attempt to explain how work-life programs contribute to work-life balance, reduce work-family conflict and ultimately improve employee well-being. Work-family conflict, one of the major constructs found in this area of literature, is defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which compliance with one of the role pressures from either the work or family domain makes it more difficult to comply with the other (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). The so-called "family responsive" human resource policies have been hailed by advocates of social change as methods for reducing the conflict between working and raising families (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Raabe and Gessner, 1988). The conflict is thought to be reduced via direct positive effects on employee perceptions of control over work and family matters (Thiede and Ganster, 1995).

There have also been theoretical links drawn between work-life balance and well-being. According to Barnett and Hyde (2001), involvement in multiple roles buffers and protects individuals from the effects of negative experiences in any one role. Marks and MacDermid (1996) argue for a more direct relationship between work-life balance and well-being whereby balanced individuals can adequately respond when confronted with a role demand because no role is seen as less worthy of attention than any other. They suggest that balanced individuals experience less depression and less role overload than others who are less balanced (Marks and MacDermid, 1996). Further, Frone *et al.* (1992) argue that a balanced engagement in work and non-work roles is associated with individual well-being because such balance reduces work-family conflict and stress, both of which detract from well-being.

Despite this strong support for work-life policy benefits, cautionary examples suggest these benefits are not universal and some policies that appear to be family-friendly may in fact be detrimental to the working conditions of employees. Whitehouse and Zetlin (1999) for example, note that work-family measures introduced for reasons other than to facilitate work-family balance, can subsequently constrain, rather than enhance the ability to effectively blend employment and family responsibilities. Charlesworth (1997) cites an example of this inconsistency between "rhetoric and reality" in the so-called family-friendly policy of flexible working hours. Based on six case studies examining processes of enterprise bargaining since the Workplace Relations Act 1996, she argues that the flexibility realized in many enterprise agreements in female-dominated industries has been solely

employer-driven, rather than being developed through a process of negotiation between the needs of both employers and employees. Changes that potentially disadvantage female employees include:

- increases in the spread of hours over which ordinary time is worked (thereby limiting access to penalty rates);
- a “freeing up” of part-time work conditions with decreased minimum hours, and an ability to ‘flex-up’ as required (thereby achieving a casual flexibility paid for at ordinary time);
- decreases in casual and penalty loadings; and
- changes to start and finish times (Charlesworth, 1997).

Glass and Finley (2002) also note an important distinction between policies which provide time for familial care versus policies which simply allow enough schedule flexibility so that family care can be worked around the (usually long) hours of employment. For example, telecommuting and flexible work schedules are arrangements that may allow or encourage high-status employees to work more rather than less (Glass and Fujimoto, 1995).

Explanations for the provision-utilisation gap

Although the benefits of work-life policy utilisation have been widely cited, albeit with the limitations outlined earlier, it is acknowledged that not all employees who need or want to use the policies, particularly women in supervisory or managerial positions and males at all levels of organisations, will do so. The literature which addresses this issue is outlined below, and is structured around five explanations that account for work-life policy uptake rates:

- (1) managerial support;
- (2) perceptions of career consequences;
- (3) organisational time expectations;
- (4) the gendered nature of policy utilisation; and
- (5) co-worker support.

It will be argued that these elements represent five dimensions of organisational work-life culture and that the development and investigation of this construct may be a useful way of addressing the provision-utilisation gap, both within and across organisations. Each of these elements will now be discussed.

Managerial support for work-family balance

It has been argued for some time that managers play an important role in the success of work-life programs because they make implicit and explicit choices regarding the adoption of workplace practices (Schneider, 1990) and are therefore in a position to actively encourage or discourage employees’ efforts to balance their work and family lives (Perlow, 1995; Thompson *et al.*, 1992). That is, where supervisors enthusiastically support the integration of paid work and family responsibilities, employees will be more likely to take up available work-life programs. On the other hand, it has been suggested that even in “family-friendly” organisations, managers may send negative

signals indicating that the use of flexible benefits is a problem for them and the organisation as a whole (Rapoport and Bailyn, 1996).

The contention that managerial support helps explain work-life policy utilisation rates is well supported. Thompson *et al.* (1999) concluded that managerial support on a daily basis may be the most critical variable in employees' decisions to use family-friendly benefits and programs. Thomas and Ganster (1995) also found that employees whose supervisors supported their efforts to balance work and family were less likely to experience work-family conflict. These findings which linked perceived family support by supervisors to reduced levels of work-family conflict were echoed in a study by Allen (2001) which also established a strong association between supervisor support and family-supportive work environments in general. Quantifying these consistent results, Bardeel (2003) found that managerial factors, including perceived organisational benefits, organisational concerns, top management support, high-performance work systems and two work-family strategies (respect and integration), accounted for 28 percent of the variance in total number of work-family practices available in different organisations and 54 percent of variance in relation to accommodating work-family workplaces. Based on a study of managers' and professionals' use of work-family policies specifically, Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) also argue that employees were more likely to use these policies if they worked with powerful supervisors and colleagues who could buffer them from perceived negative effects on their careers.

Perceptions of career consequences

The association between the under-utilisation of work-life policies and perceptions of negative career consequences has been widely cited in the literature (e.g. Griffin, 2000; Jenner, 1994a; Kirby and Krone, 2002; Solomon, 1994). That is, because work-family benefits are perceived as a "fringe benefit", employees fear that there will be an opportunity cost of utilising such benefits. Probably the most important example of this dilemma is the part-time work option. This form of employment is accessible on the basis of individual negotiation by those described in studiously gender-neutral terms, as "workers with family responsibilities" (Junor, 1998). Schwartz (1989) was one of the first to identify the career disadvantages inherent in part-time employment, and described women who returned to their jobs part-time following a birth as being "mommy track" workers. She contended that part-time women were paid less, received less training and advanced more slowly because employers attach a higher risk to investing in them (Schwartz, 1989).

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. Tam (1997) also found that part-time workers (both men and women) were more likely to be subordinates rather than supervisors as compared to their full-time counterparts, with those working fewer hours being worse off in terms of promotion prospects and entitlement to fringe benefits, than those who worked more hours per week. Also illustrating the assertion that part-time employment may negatively impact on career advancement, Junor (1998) cites statistics from the Annual Reports of five private banks to the Affirmative Action Agency which show the number of female part-time employees engaged in managerial and supervisory roles to be 0.3 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively. In contrast, the proportion of female part-time employees

categorised as “unpromoted” was 96.7 percent and the results were similar for male part-time employees (Junor, 1998). A study by Allen and Russell (1999) also found that employees who utilised family-friendly policies were perceived by co-workers as having decreased organisational commitment which was thought to subsequently affect the allocation of organisational rewards, including advancement opportunities and salary increases. Such perceptions suggest compelling reasons why work-life policies tend to be underutilised by men, single workers and career-oriented mothers (Bailyn *et al.*, 1997; Whitehouse and Zetlin, 1999).

In several studies in both Australia (Drago and Tseng, 2003; de Vaus and Wolcott, 1997; Probert, 1996) and the US (Bond *et al.*, 1998), the proportion of full-time employed mothers (across all organisational levels) preferring part-time work is up to 60 percent. The negative career consequences associated with working part-time is likely to be one of the principal reasons why many of these full-time women with dependants do not avail themselves of part-time work. Ginn *et al.* (2001) note, however, that women with family responsibilities prefer jobs with *short hours*, rather than part-time *jobs per se*. That is, women prefer to stay in jobs with the same employment conditions, status and level of responsibility, but to reduce their hours to accommodate family commitments, rather than switch to jobs in the part-time sector of the labour market, with all the disadvantages characteristic of such jobs. Thus, the long-term success of alternative work arrangements relies on the feasibility of such arrangements at all levels of the workforce, including management (Kossek *et al.*, 1999). When managers themselves participate in work-family programs, it challenges the perception of work-family policy utilisation and career progression towards management roles, as being mutually exclusive paths within the organisation (Schwartz, 1994).

Organisational time expectations

Another construct that is purported to influence the utilisation of work-family policy is organisational time expectations that may interfere with family responsibilities (Bailyn, 1993, 1997; Human Resources Development Canada, 2000; Fried, 1998; Thompson *et al.*, 1999). Bailyn (1993, 1997) suggests time expectations entail the number of hours employees are expected to work and how they use their time, for example, whether or not employees are expected to take work home, as well as temporal flexibility, meaning the ability to have discretion in one's work schedule. Clarkberg and Moen (2001) and Pocock *et al.* (2001) suggest that normative perceptions of the nature of work and career paths demand long hours as a signal of organisational commitment, productivity and motivation for advancement. However, it is argued that working long hours also hinders the ability of employees to meet conflicting responsibilities (Bailyn, 1993). In summary, engaging in part-time work, job-sharing arrangements or other reduced hours options appears incompatible with job opportunities and career advancement in an organisation with time expectations that conflict with family responsibilities.

In contrast to expectations of long working hours, a supportive work-family culture in terms of work-time commitment has been found to reduce work-family conflict (Frone *et al.*, 1997), improve job satisfaction (Rothausen, 1994) and increase productivity (Solomon, 1996). Glass and Finley (2002) suggest that for organisations to move towards more supportive time expectations, there is a need to loosen managerial control while fostering high productivity through outcome-oriented evaluation for their employees. However, a move to performance-based assessment is

likely to be more difficult than the less efficient but easier reliance on “face time” as the primary measure of productivity (Glass and Finley, 2002).

Gendered nature of policy utilisation

Based on the findings from several previous studies, gender-related perceptions of policy utilisation may also contribute to the low uptake of work-life policies in many organisations. That is, although work-life policies are ostensibly gender-neutral, in practice they revolve around facilitating the working conditions of women (Haas and Hwang, 1995; Strachan and Burgess, 1998). Indeed, women with dependent children have been the largest demographic group to utilise work-life arrangements (Charlesworth, 1997). Dissimilar utilisation rates by men and women may not only discourage male employees from using the policies, but have profound societal implications. Liff and Cameron (1997) note that because greater numbers of women utilise work-family policy, women may be seen as deficient and needing help. Hostility may also be generated from men and women without children because women with dependents are the beneficiaries of “special treatment”. Further, Neave (1992) suggests that the gender-neutral nature of formal, work-family policies contributes to structural problems in their implementation and may further entrench the status quo. She argues that treating men and women equally disadvantages women by ignoring the structural barriers which limit job opportunities and underestimates the practical difficulties which deter women from combining employment and domestic responsibilities.

The disparate utilisation rate of work-life policies by male and female employees illustrates the strongly gendered way in which employment and care-giving is combined in Western societies. Although the availability of part-time and other reduced hours work arrangements is generally considered beneficial in assisting employees to balance their work and non-work responsibilities, the extension and re-solidification of gender inequality has been attributed to working arrangements in neotraditional families, whereby the woman continues to perform most unpaid work in the household and holds a subordinate (part-time) position in the labour market (Moen and Yu, 2000). For example, differences in part-time participation between women in Australia and the United States (44 percent and 28 percent, respectively; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) may contribute to the greater time spent on household tasks by women versus men in Australia, compared to the US (Barnett and Rivers, 1998; Glezer and Wolcott, 2000). Thus, although Australian women are likely to consider widely available part-time opportunities as relatively attractive, Strachan and Burgess (1998) suggest that this situation entrenches women’s place as carers and reinforces the notion that for women workers, employment and family are joint responsibilities that have to be assimilated.

Recently, men’s participation in the raising of children has become an issue for social policy (Hobson, 2002). Provisions targeted specifically at men, such as paternity leave, may help foster a greater sharing of occupational and social responsibilities between men and women (Bercussen and Dickens, 1996), although European evidence suggests that despite offering longer periods of parental leave, the use of this leave by male employees remains low (*International Labour Review*, 1997). A recent review of men’s use of family-friendly employment provisions (Bittman *et al.*, 2004) argues that barriers to men’s use arise from three major sources:

- (1) the organisation of the workplace (including doubts about the legitimacy of men’s claims to family responsibilities and the novelty of men’s utilisation);

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- (2) the business environment (including competitive pressures to maintain market share and increase earnings); and
 - (3) the domestic organisation in employees' own homes (including the centrality of the father's rather than the mother's career).

While Cunningham (2001) argues that if it was financially feasible, men would be coming home in significant numbers to be with their families, Bittman *et al.* (2004) showed that despite a commitment to the ideal of shared parenting, most of the male employees in their study tended to give work priority over family. These findings suggest the reality of equal parenthood lags considerably behind the rhetoric of policy makers (Haas and Hwang, 1995) and clearly greater efforts are required to reduce the highly gendered patterns of work-life policy utilisation in most organisations.

Co-worker support

Another factor which may contribute to an understanding of why many employees are reluctant to take up work-family provisions is lack of co-worker support. Also referred to as the "backlash" movement (Haar and Spell, 2003; Jenner, 1994b), there is some evidence, based on theories of organisational justice (Hegtvædt *et al.*, 2002; Young, 1999) that resentment by some employees may contribute to a work environment where the utilisation of work-life policies is not encouraged. One manifestation of the resentment felt by these employees is the establishment of an advocate group of approximately 5,000 members in the United States, called the Childfree Network (Parker and Allen, 2001). These childless workers contend that they are expected to work longer hours, take assignments involving travel and are provided fewer opportunities to take advantage of flexible work arrangements than employees with children (Picard, 1997; Seligman, 1999). However, Haar and Spell (2003) also report that non-users of work-family practices perceive the advantages of these practices as over-rated.

A recent study by Kirby and Krone (2002), for example, explored the discourse of organisational members in a finance organisation regarding the implementation and utilisation of work-family policies. They found that discourse expressed by co-workers illustrated the way that both micro and macro level structures impacted on the system of how work-family benefits were constructed. Micro structures included co-worker interactions, such as comparisons of expectations of business travel for employees with and without family responsibilities (Kirby and Krone, 2002). Macro structures included the traditional separations between public and private spheres, gendered expectations and orientations of individualism and meritocracy, for example the presumption that new mothers would be "accommodated" by reducing their job responsibilities (Kirby and Krone, 2002). Thus, women who utilised the policies felt resentment from co-workers and were cognizant of needing to balance "use" versus "abuse" so as not to be seen, and treated, as a less committed worker.

Others have suggested that the "family-friendly backlash" against work-life policies has been overblown. For example, Drago *et al.* (2001) concluded that many of their sample of teachers were willing to pay for work-family policies even when they were very unlikely to benefit from the policies. The authors conclude that these tendencies emerge from powerful needs-based norms of social justice. A further study based on distributive justice theories by Hegtvædt *et al.* (2002) found that the level of co-worker

supportiveness, rather than self-interest, had the greatest influence on employee resentment in relation to the use of work-life policies. Also, Grover and Crooker (1995) found that many employees who were not parents approved of work-family policies. Notwithstanding these results, there do appear to be some differences between various groups in the perceived fairness of work-family policy provision. Parker and Allen (2001) for example, found that younger workers, minorities and those who had used flexible work arrangements had more favourable perceptions concerning work-life benefits than older workers, Caucasians and individuals who had not used flexible work arrangements. These potential differences need to be considered by organisations which are concerned with low uptake of work-life provisions.

Organisational work-life culture

The five areas of empirical literature summarized in this paper reflect elements of organisational environments which either encourage or discourage the uptake of work-life policies. As such, these elements are argued to represent aspects of organisational culture, which in its broadest sense has been defined as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

Organisational culture has been examined in relation to a diverse range of different organisational outcomes. For example, Parker and Bradley (2000) explored public sector culture in relation to new management techniques, finding that the culture continued to reflect traditional approaches to public administration. In a very different study, Wilson (2000) examined culture in relation to managing diversity in the workplace, particularly where contradictions and ambiguity in organisational values and assumptions were evident. However, the elements associated with the under-utilisation of work-life policy described here, suggest aspects of organisational culture that are only beginning to be explored.

Relatively few studies have examined organisational culture specifically in regard to work-life policy usage. For example, Sherer and Coakley (1999) addressed cultural issues such as beliefs of top management, willingness of the organisation to develop new job descriptions and effectiveness of communication networks, in relation to developing part-time employee practices. They found that specific policies and practices regarding part-time employees, particularly professional employees, were made haphazardly by organisations. Also, Haas and Hwang (1995) explored how gender and corporate culture in Sweden affected men's lesser likelihood of using family leave benefits and concluded that few companies undertook changes that would make the work environment supportive of active fatherhood. Similarly, Wise and Bond (2003) found a relationship between the perceived supportiveness of organisational culture and the inclusiveness of work-life policies, and Soonhee (2001) reported that supervisors' support and commitment to family leave policy facilitated the implementation of family leave. These studies contribute to an understanding of the types of cultural phenomena which may affect how and when employees can use existing work-life policies. Referred to as "work-family culture" or "work-life culture" and defined as "the shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the extent to

which an organisation supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives" (Thompson *et al.*, 1999, p. 394), one of the current challenges in this area is to identify and explore the theoretical dimensions which underpin the construct.

Bailyn (1997) suggested three aspects of work culture were important in regards the use of work-life programs:

- (1) supervisors' support for employees' family activities;
- (2) time issues (referred to as temporal flexibility, where an employee has discretion in their work schedule); and
- (3) operational flexibility (i.e. the autonomy to decide how work is to be done without unnecessary monitoring or restrictions).

Campbell Clark (2001) later explored these same aspects of work culture in relation to job satisfaction and family well-being and found that operational flexibility had the greatest effect on these variables. Soonhee (1998), in an earlier paper, identified one aspect of organisational culture that impacted on family leave implementation, i.e. gender-based expectations, but later emphasized supervisor support as a single underlying dimension of work-family culture as it contributed to the success or failure of family leave policies (Soonhee, 2001). Thompson *et al.* (1999) argue, based on previous research as well as a factor analysis of a 21-item scale which aimed to quantitatively measure this construct, that organizational work-family culture has three dimensions:

- (1) managerial support for work-family balance;
- (2) career consequences associated with utilising work-family benefits; and
- (3) organisational time expectations that may interfere with family responsibilities.

Several other studies have referred to and measured the extent to which organisational environments support employees' work-life balance without referring specifically to culture. These studies also tend to include the extent of provision of work-life policies in their overall measures in addition to issues related to uptake. White Jahn *et al.* (2003), for example, developed a measure of "perceived organisational family support" to account for the extent of success of work-family programs. These authors found evidence for two dimensions of support, i.e. tangible and intangible. The tangible support consisted of the policies and practices themselves, while the level of perceived intangible support impacted on their use. The range of experiences of employee support in this study may have been restricted as the sample was confined to full-time staff. Bardoel (2003), who included formal policies as well as whether the workplace was accommodating of work-family needs in her measure of "work-family responsiveness", concluded that both institutional factors (e.g. size and sector) and managerial factors were related to this construct. Kossek *et al.* (2001) examined "work climate for family role" in relation to well-being, work-family conflict and performance and conceptualized climate as firstly, sharing family concerns and secondly, making family sacrifices. Finally, Allen (2001) operationalized three dimensions of "family-supportive organisational perceptions" and compared these to work-family conflict, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover intentions. These dimensions consisted of the family-supportive policies themselves, in addition to family supportive supervisor and family-supportive organisational measures, the latter two which were derived from Thompson's (1999) measure of supervisor support,

but conceptualized as different dimensions. The other two dimensions measured by Thompson *et al.* (1999), i.e. career consequences and time expectations, were not included in Allen's (2001) study, although it is one of few pieces of published research in this area to provide a clear theoretical framework. Based on role theory (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) and the Conservation of Resources model (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999), Allen (2001) argues that a family-supportive work environment is a coping resource for individuals to deal with balancing work and non-work roles.

Work-life culture: five dimensions proposed

Although the idea that the organisational environment or culture is very likely to influence the uptake of work-life policies is becoming more accepted, the theoretical basis for these ideas in the relatively small area of literature which addresses organisational work-life culture specifically, or the supportiveness of the organisational environment generally, is under-developed and inconsistent. The semantic shift from the use of the term "work-life" as opposed to "work-family" is also purposeful in this context and consistent with an apparently recent recognition that significant non-work responsibilities do not always mean care for dependent children. Other life activities that need to be balanced with employment may include elder care, study obligations, volunteer work, or care for a significant other outside the family. A universal adoption of the term "work-life" may also have other positive consequences such as legitimizing non-standard work arrangements for a more diverse range of employees.

We argue here, based on the literature summarized previously, that work-life culture is underpinned by five conceptually distinct dimensions. The first dimension, "Manager support", is consistently emphasized in work-life policy literature which explores outcomes such as job satisfaction and work-family conflict, as well as almost every study which proposes a number of aspects of work-life culture or environment. The second and third dimensions proposed are "Organisational time expectations" and "Career consequences", both of which have strong empirical support in relation to work-life policy uptake and were proposed by Thompson *et al.* (1999), who have contributed a particularly systematic explanation of these constructs by developing and analyzing a work-family culture questionnaire. "Organisational time expectations" in this context involves how much emphasis is placed on being physically present in the workplace and the number of work hours which are expected to be considered a committed and serious employee.

We also argue that work-life culture is underpinned by "Gendered perceptions of policy use". This dimension is based on strong evidence that perceptions of work-life balance as exclusively a "women's issue" is a major reason why men's use of work-life policies is extremely low (e.g. Liff and Cameron, 1997; Neave, 1992; Strachan and Burgess, 1998). The low utilisation of work-life policies by male employees is probably one of the major reasons for the inconsistencies between men's increasing desire to have greater involvement in caring and family life and their continued prioritization of work over family. The extent to which organisations accommodate men's use, compared to women's use of work-life policies, is therefore likely to be an important component of understanding overall organisational supportiveness for employee work-life balance.

The fifth dimension of work-life culture, "Co-worker support", is based on the body of empirical literature (e.g. Kirby and Krone, 2002; Picard, 1997; Seligman, 1999) which

suggests that in many organisations, potentially negative attitudes towards, and beliefs about, co-workers with limited non-work responsibilities may limit work-life program uptake rates. Given the debate in the literature about whether this phenomenon actually exists, it is likely that supportive or unsupportive co-workers vary across organisations and work units. However, it seems highly feasible that where co-workers are negative about the use of work-life policies, employees would be less likely to take up these options. This assumption, as well as the backlash evidence that does exist, suggests “Co-worker support” is potentially an important component of work-life culture that warrants further attention.

These five dimensions of organisational work-life culture which we suggest account for the gap between work-life policy provision and utilisation are represented diagrammatically in Figure 1. The validity of the model remains to be tested in future research, but may be a useful starting point from which to explore this important phenomenon in contemporary organisational environments.

Summary and conclusions

In summary, work-life policies have the potential to provide substantial benefits to both employees and organisations, but are commonly under-utilised by eligible employees. Substantial changes in social relations and labour market composition such as greater numbers of women in paid work, increasing numbers of employees with elder-care responsibilities, and greater participation of men in household and childcare activities, means that the reasons for low uptake rates of flexible work options, family leave policies and dependent-care benefits requires greater attention. Developing a better understanding of organisational work-life culture may be an important component of addressing the provision-utilisation gap, although more work is needed to develop and test the underlying dimensions of this construct. Testing the factor structure and psychometric properties of a measure of work-life culture in larger samples than are commonly used in published research in this area would also seem worthwhile. A valid measure which encompasses all of the major aspects of work-life culture may allow human resource professionals to systematically evaluate specific work-life policies in their organisations and assess whether policy aims are being achieved at the level of individual employees and/or across different work units within the organisation. Further research in this area may also lead to targeted strategies

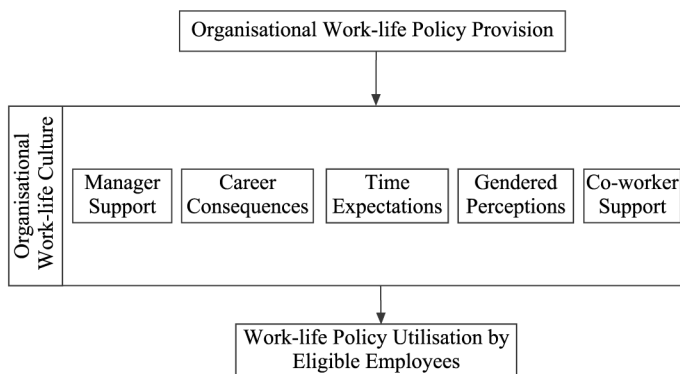


Figure 1.
Five dimensions of
organisational work-life
culture that account for
the gap between work-life
policy provision and
utilisation

which help alleviate the cultural barriers preventing the use of work-life policies by eligible employees and subsequently maximize positive outcomes, both individual and organisational, associated with their uptake.

Note

1. The terms “work-family balance” and “work-life balance” have both been used in previous work to describe the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work and non-work roles (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003). The term “work-life balance” has been deliberately used here to broaden the construct’s relevance to employees struggling to balance non-work responsibilities that do not include dependent childcare and to lessen the strongly gendered nature of work-life policy utilisation. However, the term “work-family” has been preserved where it was used in original research.

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