



Understanding differential organizational responses to work/life issues

259

The role of beliefs and decision-making styles of chief executive officers

Barbara A.W. Eversole, Gene Gloeckner and James H. Banning
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore differential adoption of work/life programs by organizations by studying CEOs.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual framework was developed from interview data from 26 Denver-area (Colorado, USA) CEOs.

Findings – A decision-making model was conceptualized as the major finding of this study. CEOs decided on work/life programs on content-based bottom-line arguments, on process-based criteria, such as moral, spiritual, or flexibility beliefs, or on personal experiences that these programs return to the bottom line. If a CEO decided based on bottom-line arguments, the main variable is whether or not retention is important.

Research limitations/implications – As a qualitative study, caution should be exercised in generalizing to the general population of CEOs, particularly those who choose not to adopt work/life programs.

Practical implications – The study provides data useful for top management persuasion, executive development, understanding executive decision-making processes, and understanding factors important to work/life program adoption.

Originality/value – Many factors have been studied concerning differential work/life program adoption, including the composition of the HR team. This is the first study to consider the influence of CEOs as key decision-makers in the adoption decision. This study also offers a model that potentially explains the decision-making process used by executives for human resource programs, and perhaps other programs as well.

Keywords Decision making, Chief executives, Family friendly organizations, Job satisfaction, Change management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Work/family issues are increasingly prevalent today as more and more families consist of dual-wage earners; in fact, in the US dual-earner couples with children outnumber families with only the husband working outside the home by two to one. As workers are expected to work longer and longer hours, the family bears this burden increasingly, resulting in increased stress and role conflict for workers with dependent care responsibilities, including elder care. Organizations vary in their response to this problem. Many have offered a series of family-friendly benefits in the workplace to help ease the burden on their employees, but more have not.



Our approach to researching the variance in adoption of work/family programs by organizations as a response to work/family issues is by understanding the beliefs of CEOs and how their beliefs are translated into decisions whether or not to adopt programs. Work/family solutions need to be driven and/or supported by top management in order for them to become part of an organization's culture and preventing their sabotage by the culture. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how their views are affect adoption decisions.

Some chief executive officers (CEOs) have adopted work/family programs at their organizations in response to their employees' work and family balancing needs, while others have not. The problem for this research project was to discover the processes by which chief executives' beliefs may be translated into decisions about adoption.

For the purposes of this article, we will use work/family and work/life interchangeably. Rapoport and Bailyn (1996) defined family as "... all aspects of an individual's personal life: those involvements and commitments, both at home and in the community, that an individual has outside his or her employment" (p. 15). Work/family or work/life programs are any program or formal policy put into place by an organization to help its employees balance their work and non-work lives (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 1997). When work and family responsibilities conflict, the result is poor outcomes for both employees and employer since the existence of work/family conflict is related to poor performance, poor retention, and job dissatisfaction (Frone, 2003).

Literature review

Two separate bodies of literature were reviewed for this research: the work/family literature and the management decision-making literature. They will each be discussed separately. It is the intersection of the two that is the subject of the research, and we have not found any other research addressing a topic similar to our research.

Work and family literature

While the literature on the work and family conflict is quite extensive, our review of the literature indicated that the research on organizational responses to this conflict is scarce. The role that executives, and especially CEOs, play in organizational decisions regarding responses has been rarely empirically investigated, with the exception of the Milliken *et al.*'s (1998) study of human resource executives. That study found that the presence of people with dual-career or eldercare experiences in top management did not affect whether or not an organization offered work/family programs. Whether or not organizations have provided work/life programs for their employees is referred to as differential adoption decisions that organizations make in response to the work/life balancing/integrating needs of their employees (see Morgan and Milliken, 1992). While there is general acknowledgment that employees are encountering difficulties in balancing their work and family lives, a wide level of agreement does not exist as to how the problem should be addressed on an organizational level. Indeed, Rapoport *et al.* (2002) contended that work and life are not two separate spheres that need to be balanced; rather, integration of these two is key. Some organizations have responded by providing programs such as flexitime, part-time employment, and job-sharing, and have claimed increased retention and productivity (Galinsky *et al.*, 1991).

Dex and Scheibl (1999) analyzed all available research and concluded that there were considerable benefits to having work/family policies; however, they could not conclude that if other organizations were to adopt these policies, they too would benefit. In fact, work/family balance problems have been much better documented than the effectiveness of the programs designed to alleviate them. In the absence of compelling data showing the effectiveness of work/family programs, how do CEOs make the decision to provide them in their organizations? In the absence of data, beliefs about these programs may play a pivotal role in decision-making of CEOs.

Strategic decision-making processes

Studies of CEO characteristics and differences have been popular in both business and academic circles (Rajagopalan and Spreitzer, 1997). Previous research has argued that executive judgment guides strategic choices. Others have researched CEO characteristics and their effect on strategic decision-making, arguing that characteristics are proxies for cognitive orientation, and that organizations reflect the characteristics of their top managers.

Moreover, the study of strategic decision-making processes of executives is a very active subject in current management research (Papadakis *et al.*, 1998), but the theory pertaining to managerial actions in general is not well-understood (Rajagopalan and Spreitzer, 1997). Deciding which issues deserve top management attention, and therefore an organizational response, as well as interpreting the issues correctly, are both critical yet difficult tasks for organizational management (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). Whether or not the CEO believes issues can be addressed effectively by the CEO has been theorized as managerial discretion (Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987). Carpenter and Golden (1997) added the concept of “perceived” discretion, that is, the perception the CEO has of their ability to act.

Rajagopalan and Spreitzer (1997) did an extensive review of managerial decision-making studies and found they could be grouped into two main theoretical orientations to strategic change. One group, termed “content,” is made up of studies that focus on a more rational approach to decision-making, while the other group, termed “process,” is made up of studies focusing on the role of management in strategic change. This group has two types of studies, “learning” studies and “cognitive” studies. Learning studies focus on the learning that arises from trial and error in change efforts, while cognitive studies focus on the characteristics of the decision-makers. Managerial cognitions include knowledge structures, core beliefs, and causal maps and schemas. Lovullo and Kahneman (2003) contended executives are often victims of their own cognitive biases, often discounting costs while inflating the benefits of initiatives.

According to Rajagopalan and Spreitzer (1997), a key assumption of cognitive studies is that the environment cannot be objectively understood, and therefore understanding is cognitively mediated. These types of studies have found that strategic change occurs when changes in environmental conditions are accompanied by changes in managerial cognitions. Moreover, transformational changes are more likely to be accompanied by changes in the actual belief structures of top managers. Theoretically, this may explain why some organizations change in response to environmental change, while others do not; in fact, two studies (Goll and Zeitz, 1991; Lewin and Stephens, 1994) found that key decision-makers accounted for organizational response variance.

In cognitive studies, models have been proposed that attempt to explain how executives make strategic choices. One model, proposed by Kochan *et al.* (1986), posited that managerial ideologies, or beliefs, lead to actions, which then lead to organizational outcomes. This is similar to Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action and Greenwald's (1968) cognitive mediation theory. The theory of reasoned action assumes that people make rational, and therefore conscious, choices about their behavior based on the information available to them and their perceptions of the implications of the behavior. The cognitive mediation theory postulates that cognition, or cognitive responses such as thoughts, mediate persuasion. Kochan *et al.* (1986) is in contrast to the conventional wisdom in the field of industrial relations, which is that managers utilize rational choice processes dictated by market and institutional forces (Godard, 1997; von Werder, 1999).

Several authors and researchers have noted the importance of the chief executive in the adoption and implementation of work/life initiatives (Bankert and Googins, 1996; Budd, 1996; Hall, 1990; Mascotte, 1993; Perlow, 1998). Culture is most likely driven by top management, leaving the rest of the company to adapt (Jacobs and Gerston, 2004). Starrels (1992) stated in a review of work/life policy research:

... it would be interesting to know more about the family roles of male managers who decide disproportionately whether to adopt work/life policies and how such policies will be implemented (p. 271).

Research question

Simply put, the research question is how do CEOs make decisions regarding the adoption of work/life programs at their organizations? More formally, the research question is whether and how differential responses (adoption or non-adoption of work/life programs) to the same environmental conditions (i.e. every employee has the same need to balance/integrate their work and personal lives, regardless of employment situation) are due to strategic decision-making processes, and how these processes are in turn driven by the beliefs of top management, specifically CEOs, rather than by empirical data about work/life program efficacy. Therefore, a secondary purpose of the research was to uncover CEO beliefs to gather data as to whether beliefs are basis for the adoption decisions.

Methodology

This study utilized a basic interpretive qualitative research strategy (Merriam, 2002) that sought to explore the phenomena of CEO beliefs and how work/life program adoption decisions were constructed. Merriam's basic interpretive strategy supports the use of interviews to gather data from a group of participants and the use of inductive analytic strategies for data analysis. Interviews were the data source and the data analysis phase of the project was built on the processes associated with constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Inductive coding was used to induce a set of categories along with plausible relationships among the categories. These categories/concepts and relationships provided the framework for the conceptual framework that captured the experiences and the constructions of the participants (Schwandt, 1997).

Data were collected primarily from one-hour face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with participants recruited with a letter, by personal contact, or by referrals. Interviews were open-ended with a few questions. All face-to-face interviews took place at the organizational site, in the informant's office, or in a conference room. Interviews were audio taped with the permission of the informants. Specifically, informants were 26 CEOs, except for one Division Vice-President, of for-profit organizations in a variety of industries in Denver, Colorado. Two of the participants were women. After leaving each interview, the researcher recorded impressions and observations on audiotape, creating a reflexive journal. Also, when available, documentation was collected on work/life programs available within the organization.

In the sample, there were two CEOs who did not have work/life programs and one who said he was not supportive of providing programs. While this added some diversity within the sample, the majority of the CEOs provided work/life programs; therefore the findings of the study are most relevant to CEOs who do provide programs.

The audio taped interviews were transcribed and then the coding process was assisted by the use of the HyperResearch software. The data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis on an existing database as outlined by West (2001). Meaning units within the interviews were given open codes that capture the meaning of the selected text. These inductive codes were constantly compared with the data and new codes. The codes resulting from this open coding process allowed for the inducement of more abstract categories that both organized the open codes and moved the analysis toward the resulting conceptual framework (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Trustworthiness was ensured with member checks, thick descriptions, and audit trail procedures.

Findings

The research question for this study was to uncover the processes by which a CEO decides whether or not to implement work/life programs at their organization. The data generated by the interviews with CEOs and then transcribed and coded using HyperResearch were summarized into three major levels. On the macro level, a description of the overall process of understanding the phenomena of CEO beliefs and how they might be translated into adoption decisions is presented. This is an overall summary of the findings. The second level focuses on strategies. The strategies used by CEOs have been conceptualized in this framework as their decision-making styles. On the third level of analysis, these decision-making styles have been categorized into five major types. To further illustrate the five types, five representative CEO cases have been described. Direct quotes from CEOs have been used to highlight comments indicative of the decision-making style employed by the CEOs.

Figure 1 is a graphical depiction of this framework conceptualizing the understanding of the phenomena of CEO beliefs and how they might be translated into adoption decisions. Decision-making styles are conceptualized as the strategies that CEOs use to deal with their beliefs about work/life issues and programs, thus leading to adoption decisions. CEO beliefs may have been influenced by life experiences and personality factors, and may also be influenced by other factors such as age or education. The major finding of this research consists of elucidating these strategies and how they lead to adoption decisions.

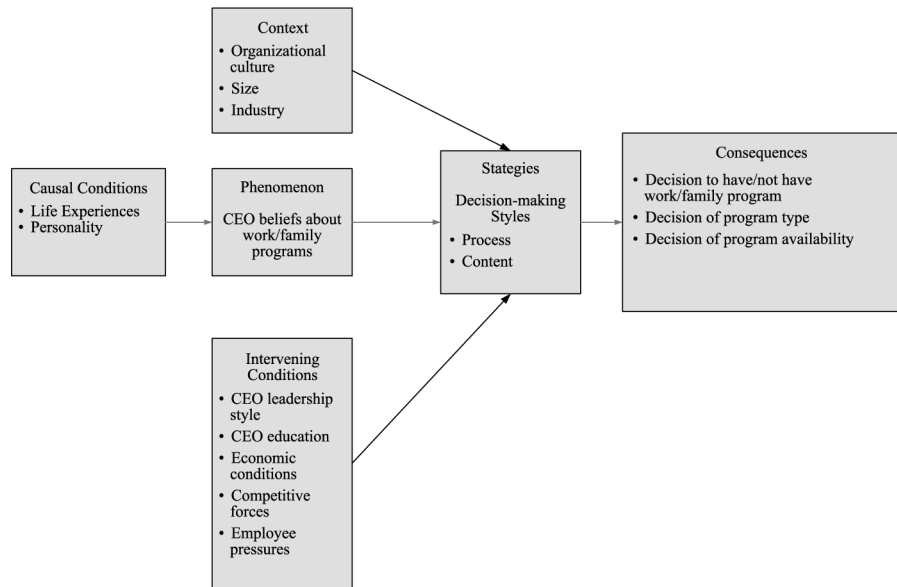


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework for
differential adoption of
work/life programs

Strategies: CEO decision-making styles

A categorization similar to the Rajagopalan and Spreitzer (1997) model of distinguishing between types of studies of strategic decision-making processes emerged from the data. Content decision-making is rational, focusing on objective data on cost/benefit, productivity, employee attraction and retention. Process decision-making has two groups, learning and cognitive. Learning processes focus on experimentation, experiences, and talking with others. Cognitive processes focus on beliefs, morality, knowledge schemas, and perceptions. A third process category that was not included in their model, emerged from the data. We named this the affective style, as it is based on feelings of empathy and respect that CEOs had for their employees.

How beliefs of CEOs are translated into decisions to adopt work/life programs

Figure 2 is a decision tree diagram that explains the differential adoption of work/life programs by CEOs based on their strategies, or decision-making styles. This decision tree describes every one of our 26 cases. Differential CEO adoption decisions can be understood by uncovering differences in how CEOs make decisions in the area of work/life conflict issues of their employees. The differences may apply in other situations as well, but the data only speak to this situation. If a CEO claimed sensitivity but their organization had no actual programs available, or if work/life conflict was not even acknowledged, the work/life decision is a level 1 decision. A level 3 decision was assigned if a CEO did make programs available to most employees, either on a formal or informal basis. Finally, a level 2 decision falls somewhere in between: the CEO has decided on, or tacitly approved, a limited availability of a limited number of programs, on a case-by-case basis, either formal or informal. Most organizations did not have formal programs; the ones that did usually only had a formal flextime program.

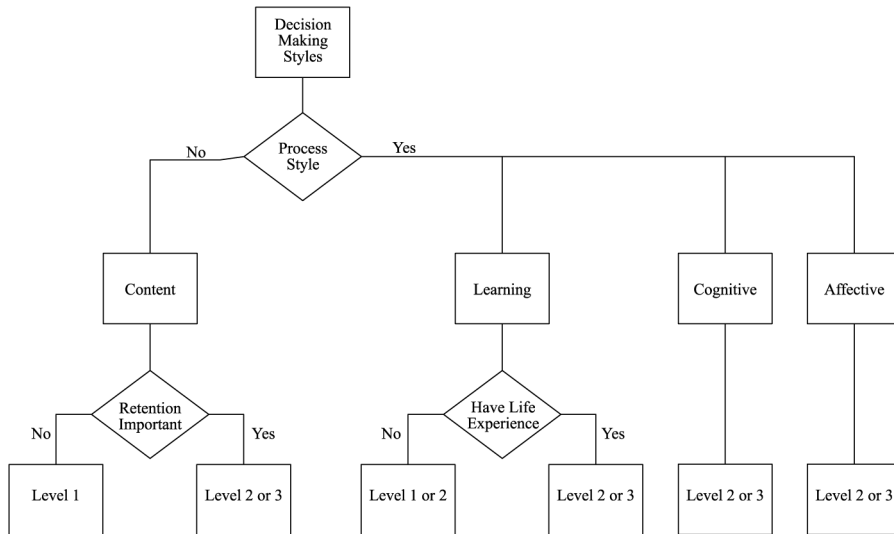


Figure 2.
Decision-making styles

Essentially, if a CEO had a process decision making style, he or she would make a positive adoption decision, unless they had no experience, belief, or identification with work/life conflict themselves, either directly or indirectly. If a CEO had a content decision making style, he or she would not decide to adopt work/life programs at their organization unless he or she had a need to retain a valued employee, or saw a need to retain valuable workers who happened to be parents, generally women who were new mothers. According to this Figure 2, in order for a positive (level two or three) adoption decision to be made, the CEO had either a process decision making style and had either learned through experience or some other means that programs would solve work/life conflict issues, had a belief that it was the right thing to do, or had empathy for employees experiencing these issues, or a content decision making style and perceived a need to retain employees.

CEO cases: case types

The third level of analysis is to understand the decision-making styles that differentiated CEOs in the sample. Five distinct categories can be described that illustrate the five decision-making styles. These styles may describe the process that led to CEOs subsequent decisions about work/life programs in their organizations – or the decision not to decide. These five categories are: process decision-making styles (cognitive, learning, or affective) and content decision-making styles (with retention perceived as a need or retention not perceived as a need).

Learning egalitarians (process decision-makers with learning). This group included CEOs who, whether or not they had direct experiences with work/life conflict themselves, did see employees or colleagues struggling with the issues. They decided to try some alternative work arrangements and, when they worked out well, implemented them around the company. Chris' (no real names are used here) wife worked outside the home while raising children with a full-time nanny and therefore experienced no work/life conflict, but early in his career worked with women who were

balancing careers and families. He tried some part-time arrangements and was quite pleased at the way they worked out. He felt like he was getting more for his money; his part-time employees actually worked more hours than they were being paid for, but felt valued because they had been given flexibility:

... she worked for me part-time three days a week in a project oriented role and I decided that she was one of my most talented people in my organization ... I actually gave her a business to run which she did on a three day a week basis and we always used to joke about how she was the most productive and efficient person in the organization ...

For this type of CEO, having tried alternative work arrangements, and having them work out well, was enough of a reason to continue to offer flexibility. Moreover, Chris' open-minded, learning oriented personality and decision-making style was able to envision employees being able to be promoted to high-level positions despite their unorthodox working arrangements. He believed that employees who were offered flexibility to balance their work and family lives were extremely productive and their need for balance did not affect their opportunities for advancement in their organization. Moreover, talent, not time put in or where it was put in, mattered more to this CEO when it came to advancing employees.

Empathetic CEOs (process decision-makers with affect). A CEO's affective style of decision-making seemed to occur with the influence of a CEO's parents and/or by the direct experience of work/life balance issues in their career. Justin noted in his interview that his empathy for employees came from his dad. He genuinely felt that families came first, and because he felt this way, he believed that it was important to allow employees flexibility in spending time with their families. Although his company was in a particularly inflexible industry, Justin was very open to whatever flexible arrangements his employees proposed. He even approved an initiative that he could not justify financially simply because it improved morale. Another male CEO, Don, had the experience of being "Mr Mom:"

See I got divorced and for two years, for four years I was Mr Mom, I had two of my kids I did everything. I tell ya, by 9 p.m. I could barely function. I mean by the time they came home from school, made sure they were home, made them dinner, did their homework, made their lunches, read them stories, get to bed, do the wash, get up do breakfast, get 'em packed get 'em up nothing's happened yet for work, I haven't done anything for myself yet, so I don't think most men have that so what I'm trying to do is deal with the need not necessarily the want, in other words, how do I make it easier.

Laura and Gloria, the only two female CEOs in the sample, fell into this category. Laura had her children while on the job, and while she resented it at the time, she did what she had to do to keep her life in balance. She now supports programs that help her employees do the same, although employees still need to pilot programs to prove that they can work in the organization. Gloria kept her business going with a child and through a divorce as a single mother. She also extended flexibility to both male and female employees to help meet their family obligations. Since these CEOs were working parents themselves, they had empathy for the parents trying to balance work and family responsibilities.

Spiritual/moral and flexible CEOs (process decision makers with cognition). This group of CEOs made decisions based on their cognitive belief structures. There were predominantly two different beliefs that affected program adoption: that work/life programs were the right thing to do, or the belief that flexibility was an important value.

Bob and Dick personified this type of CEO, although in other ways they could not have been more different. Bob ran a small technology company, and was married with kids. His wife had worked prior to raising the kids and continued to influence him on work/life issues. Dick was the CEO of the largest company in my sample, and his wife had stayed home to raise the children. Both CEOs, however, felt that work/life programs were simply the right thing to do. Financial analyses were not needed – the decision was made simply on their belief structure:

...you know you're gonna die cause we haven't found a way to avoid that then if when you're dead there is an afterlife you're gonna feel damn bad if you had a chance to do all these good works and you didn't do it and now you have an eternity of hellfire and brimstone and if there isn't anything after that then doing these things will have made the world a better place so you haven't really lost anything you just won't care.

Other CEOs in this group believed in flexibility. Since they preferred flexibility for themselves, they were more likely to offer it to their employees. They were by nature flexible. They chafed at the inflexibility of their earlier jobs, so as CEO they tried to give their employees as much flexibility as possible. Some experienced work/life conflict, while others did not. One example of how the belief in flexibility plays out in the workplace is the perception that job type precludes flexibility. Several CEOs said call centers or customer service centers cannot be flexible; while one claimed that his center needs to be staffed for flexibility. His perception is that it is most important to allow the front-line employees – the ones in daily contact with customers – flexibility because they are the employees that he wants to keep most happy.

I need 'em CEOs (content decision-makers with perceived need for retention). Maxwell personified this type. When asked why he promoted work/life arrangements for his employees even though he believed that mothers should stay home and that part-time working moms could not compete with full-time employees, he replied that he needed them:

... the number of young women that come in this company get married get pregnant and leave is just about ... everybody of a young age and so for a woman in her career even if you're flexible and we do that we have one of our key ladies in marketing had a baby and we strained all the rules and flexed everything and so she works here and there and sometimes but it's hard for her to compete with other people in her department when she's only working two or three days a week I mean she'll never make it to the top at two or three days a week.

His ambivalence about working mothers was very clear, and perhaps the reason that young pregnant women leave Maxwell's organization. They are aware that all the flexibility in the world does not compensate for a CEO who believes that flexible work arrangements leave you unable to compete with others in the organization that are working traditionally. This belief contrasts sharply with CEOs who use a learning decision-making style.

Ain't broke don't fix it CEOs (content decision-makers with no perceived need for retention). These CEOs, while aware of the concept of work/life programs to alleviate work/life conflicts of their employees, reported that there was no need in their organization because they had not been asked to institute programs, or they felt like work/life programs were a Pandora's Box, that once opened could never be closed. These CEOs worried about fairness, worried that chaos would ensue when every employee wanted flexibility, and that offering flexibility would be a logistical

nightmare. They may acknowledge that such a problem might exist, but they did not see that their organization should play a role in alleviating these conflicts, even if they did exist.

Mike is a prototypical example of a CEO who does not believe it is appropriate for an organization to get involved in this issue. Although Mike had a daughter who is a working mother, he would not let his personal experiences affect his decisions about his organization. The ability to allow past experiences to affect decision-making distinguishes the learning CEOs. Although Mike would fight any attempt to make a work/life program policy, he did allow a work-at-home situation to occur:

... we have a person here in particular that works three days at the office and two days home and I do know that there's a approximate one year old child who is part of the process probably not even one year old I can't tell you I like it very well ... but I'll also tell ya from my standpoint then I go straight to plan B and I opt to use the back-up. If the person's here, fine, if the person's not here I go to plan B, I don't worry about whether they're home working or not home working ... we've got an expression, we've got enough problems, we don't need your problems.

It is difficult to see how this employee will advance due to the negative attitude of her CEO to her flexible work arrangement.

Discussion

At this point we would like to situate the findings in the literature that we have reviewed, and to describe if our findings support or do not support other relevant studies in the literature.

Our findings provided partial support for Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action. For CEOs whose beliefs influenced their decision-making, the model was supported. Their beliefs influenced their behavior, as indicated by decisions made. However, for those CEOs whose beliefs about work/life conflict did not influence their decision-making, theory was not supported.

Dutton and Ashford (1993) pointed out that executives only act on issues that have been brought to their attention. According to the findings of the present study, personal experience with work/life conflict was not enough to get the attention of some executives. However, the issue of retention did seem to be an attention-getter. CEOs who made decisions using a content style would only adopt work/life programs in order to retain valuable employees. Retention is considered to be a proven benefit, and a proven strategy to retain an employee when family constraints intrude on their employment viability.

Moreover, for CEOs using primarily a content decision-making style, only direct feedback (or the squeaky wheel) from employees, in the form of surveys, complaints, or requests, leads them to perceive a need for work/life programs in their organizations. Regardless of personal beliefs or experiences, this type of executive will not act unless he or she perceives a need. These executives have a content style of decision-making; it is rational and takes into account only outside factors.

Other CEO types allow their experiences to affect their beliefs and attitudes, including their family experiences, and perceive a need even in the absence of overwhelming data from their organization. These CEOs did not require a squeaky wheel; their direct personal knowledge and beliefs were enough. They had a process

decision-making style, learning, cognitive or affective. The existence of CEOs with a cognitive style supports Greenwald's (1968) cognitive mediation theory.

Findings of this research are in agreement with the research conducted by Milliken *et al.* (1998) who found that the presence of people with dual-career or eldercare experiences in top management did not affect whether or not an organization offered work/life programs. Moreover, the converse does not appear to be true; that is, that the absence of any personal experience with work/life conflict, does not mean that there is no response to this issue. In fact, the learning egalitarian CEOs, Christopher Mason and Fred Andrews, did not experience any work conflict directly, although they did encounter it indirectly with colleagues and employees.

Whether or not the CEO believes issues can be addressed effectively by the CEO has been theorized as managerial discretion (Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987). Carpenter and Golden (1997) added the concept of "perceived" discretion. Therefore, it is more important what the CEO perceives about his discretion, or ability to act in response to a perceived need, than what his discretion actually is. The current findings support this theory of perceived managerial discretion. CEOs who had process styles of decision-making did perceive that they had the ability to influence the work/life conflict needs of their employees. So did CEOs who perceived a need for retention. However, CEOs who did not perceive a need for retention also made comments suggesting that they felt that they did not have discretion in this area. This was not their problem, they wanted to be supportive, but just did not see how they could help with work/life conflict.

Conclusions and recommendations

As shown by the preceding review, the work/life literature up until now has not addressed the influence of CEOs on the differential adoption of work/life programs in organizations. Starrels (1992) wondered at whether or not CEOs would be more sensitive to work/life conflict issues if they themselves had experienced it. It would be plausible that if a CEO had experienced conflict themselves, they would become champions for programs to alleviate conflict in the workplace. Our research shows, however, that for some CEOs, perhaps the majority, personal experiences have no influence on their decisions about program adoption. Rather, it is the way that a CEO makes decisions in this area that differentiates whether or not programs will be adopted.

In conclusion, then, we have found that there are five distinct processes that this sample of CEOs have used to make decisions whether or not to implement work/family programs at their organizations. The central issue for this research was uncovering how CEOs make decisions about work/life program adoption and the link between their beliefs and adoption decisions. The findings, however, suggest that beliefs of CEOs only play a role in adoption decisions for CEOs who use primarily cognitive decision-making styles. If a CEO uses another style of decision-making, their beliefs are not as relevant to the decision. Other factors, such as learning, empathy, rational arguments, and need for retention are also factors in decision-making processes of CEOs.

Practical implications

The actionable purpose of understanding differential adoption of work/life programs by CEOs in organizations is to find an influence point. How could CEOs be persuaded to adopt work/life programs at their organizations? If decision-making style is key to program adoption, rather than rational, bottom-line, business case arguments, first the

decision-making style of the CEO needs to be ascertained. Moreover, it would suggest that even if high quality empirical data about work/life program effectiveness existed, it might not make much difference to the adoption of work/life programs. In order for more programs to be adopted, effort might have to be focused on changing CEOs' perceptions both that a need exists and that they have discretion in addressing it – their role in solving the problem, that it is solvable, and that it will not hurt their business. This would be particularly true for CEOs primarily using a content style of decision-making.

Many process CEOs indicated that change occurred mostly on the personal level, either through experiences with their families or valued employees or peers, or through discussions with other CEOs. This suggests two major persuasion strategies: finding CEOs willing to talk about their positive work/life program experiences with other CEOs, and finding ways to provide CEOs with positive work/life program experiences. These strategies would not work, however, with CEOs who do not yet perceive a need; employees also need to take more risks in bringing this issue to the attention of the executive. The wheel needs to squeak considerably more before these executives notice. This is in agreement with the finding by Morgan and Milliken (1992) that employee surveys are needed to bring the work/life needs of employees to the attention of the top decision-makers. Organizations need to ask the question to uncover the need.

Alternately, there may be some organizations and industries where the CEO perceives that some work/life programs simply cannot be conducted without hurting the business itself. If this is the case, the employee with balancing needs must decide to take on the problem without organizational help, or seek employment elsewhere. CEOs with content styles and a perception that all their employees are happy and they retain the ones that they want to retain are not going to be easily convinced to adopt work/life programs.

The findings on the possible existence of five specific decision-making styles or types add to knowledge in the field of HRD by adding to the research on how executives make decisions. This is useful knowledge when trying to persuade CEOs on new programs such as work/life, training, succession planning, or planning large-scale change. The decision-making styles may provide a guideline for persuading top management.

These findings also contribute to new knowledge in HRD by providing additional data for executive development. They pertain here for how to develop executives to be more family-friendly, but they may extend to other developmental issues for executives, such as increasing emotional intelligence. While there is little that can be done in a development sense to impact an executive's personal decisions (whether or not a spouse should stay home to care for the children, for example), much can be done to create experiences for CEOs that could lead to a greater sensitivity to family issues. For example, exposure to colleagues and employees that are experiencing the conflict, exposure to other CEOs who have had good experiences with higher productivity and retention due to work/life programs; and championing a pilot effort to try some of these programs and then evaluate their effectiveness, are all planned experiences that could influence an executive's beliefs and therefore decision-making. However, it is crucial to note that this development effort would only be effective on CEOs who use a learning decision making process. CEOs using a content process would remain unaffected, since this type of CEO by definition intentionally makes decisions based on rational,

objective data, irrespective of their personal opinions or beliefs. Moreover, it is difficult to predict work/life adoption because of a mix of motivations; one CEO may adopt them because they want to make it easier for employees to work all the time, while another because they genuinely believe that their employees need help balancing and that these programs will help them.

This brings us to an interesting question: can CEOs who predominantly use a content decision-making style be taught or persuaded to use learning, cognitive, or affective styles? CEOs using process styles could also use a content style. Did they start out with a content style and then evolve into using other styles as well? Are these other styles more highly evolved or sophisticated processes that can be learned, and if so, how? This issue gets to the heart of leadership development: what is innate, and what is learned, and how do they interact? This research contributes information for this ongoing dialogue.

Recommendations for future research

Further research into this area would involve testing the conceptual framework that has been presented with a larger sample size that is more geographically diverse. In particular, this distribution of the sample was skewed toward executives who perceived a need for work/life programs, as they were the only ones who consented to be interviewed. Strategies to reach the majority of CEOs who do not perceive a need or any discretion in this issue need to be devised. A quantitative analysis of random CEO samples could be done to see if there were significant differences between CEO types in making differential adoption decisions, and whether decision-making styles actually predicted work/life adoption decisions.

Further research is also needed in operationally defining “family-friendly” and understanding the complex relationship between family-friendliness and profitability. The adoption of work/life programs is not a black and white issue; organizations may have work/life programs in policy, but not in actual practice and parts of an organization may be more family-friendly than others, regardless of policy. Once better methods are devised to ascertain the level of family-friendliness of an organization, the question, “are family-friendly organizations more profitable?” may be easier to answer. If so, the question still remains: are family-friendly organizations more profitable because they are more accommodating to workers, or are organizations more family-friendly because they can afford to be? The answers to these questions are critical to organizational performance and to the future of our society.

References

- Ajzen, I. and Fishbein, M. (1980), *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behavior*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Bankert, E.C. and Googins, B.K. (1996), “Family-friendly: says who?”, *Across the Board*, Vol. 33 No. 7, pp. 45-9.
- Budd, J.F. Jr (1996), “Selling work/family agendas to CEOs”, *HR Focus*, Vol. 73 No. 5, pp. 22-3.
- Carpenter, M.A. and Golden, B.R. (1997), “Perceived managerial discretion: a study of cause and effect”, *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 187-206.
- Dex, S. and Scheibl, F. (1999), “Business performance and family-friendly policies”, *Journal of General Management*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 22-37.

- Dutton, J.E. and Ashford, S.J. (1993), "Selling issues to top management", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 397-428.
- Frone, M.R. (2003), "Work-family balance", in Quick, J.C. and Tetrick, L.E. (Eds), *Handbook of Occupational Health Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.
- Galinsky, E., Friedman, D.E. and Hernandez, C.A. (1991), *The Corporate Reference Guide to Work-Family Programs*, Families and Work Institute, New York, NY.
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A. (1967), *The Discovery of Conceptual Framework*, Aldine, Chicago, IL.
- Godard, J. (1997), "Whither strategic choice? Do managerial IR ideologies matter?", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 206-28.
- Goll, I. and Zeitz, G. (1991), "Conceptualizing and measuring corporate ideology", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 191-207.
- Greenwald, A.G. (1968), "Cognitive learning, cognitive response to persuasion, and attitude change", in Greenwald, A.G., Brock, T.C. and Ostrom, T.M. (Eds), *Psychological Foundations of Attitudes*, Academic Press, New York, NY.
- Hall, D.T. (1990), "Promoting work/family balance: an organization-change approach", *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 5-18.
- Hall, D.T. and Richter, J. (1988), "Balancing work life and home life: what can organizations do to help?", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 2, pp. 213-23.
- Hambrick, D.C. and Finkelstein, S. (1987), "Managerial discretion: a bridge between polar views of organizational outcomes", in Staw, B.M. and Cummings, L.L. (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 9, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, pp. 369-406.
- Jacobs, J.A. and Gerston, K. (2004), *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Kochan, T.A., Katz, H. and McKersie, R. (1986), *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Lewin, A.Y. and Stephens, C.U. (1994), "CEO attitudes as determinants of organizational design: an integrated model", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 183-212.
- Lovullo, D. and Kahneman, D. (2003), "Delusions of success", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 81 No. 7, pp. 56-64.
- Mascotte, J.P. (1993), "Rising above the rhetoric", in Miranda, E.J. and Murphy, B.E. (Eds), *Work-Family: Redefining the Business Case*, The Conference Board, New York, NY, pp. 11-12.
- Merriam, S.B. (2002), *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Milliken, F.J., Martins, L.L. and Morgan, H. (1998), "Explaining organizational responsiveness to work-family issues: the role of human resource executives as issue interpreters", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 5, pp. 580-92.
- Morgan, H. and Milliken, F.J. (1992), "Keys to action: understanding differences in organizations' responsiveness to work-and-family issues", *Human Resources Management*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 227-48.
- Papadakis, V.M., Lioukas, S. and Chambers, D. (1998), "Strategic decision-making processes: the role of management and context", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 19, pp. 115-47.
- Parasuraman, S. and Greenhaus, J.H. (1997), "The changing world of work and family", in Parasuraman, S. and Greenhaus, J.H. (Eds), *Integrating Work and Family: Challenges for a Changing World*, Quorum Books, Westport, CT.

-
- Perlow, L.A. (1998), "Boundary control: the social ordering of work and family time in a high-tech corporation", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 328-57.
- Rajagopalan, N. and Spreitzer, G.M. (1997), "Toward a theory of strategic change: a multi-lens perspective and integrative framework", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 48-79.
- Rapoport, R. and Bailyn, L. (1996), *Relinking Life and Work: Toward a Better Future*, The Ford Foundation, New York, NY.
- Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J.K. and Pruitt, B.H. (2002), *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Schwandt, T.A. (1997), *Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Starrels, M.E. (1992), "The evolution of workplace family policy research", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 259-78.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory, Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- von Werder, A. (1999), "Argumentation rationality of management decisions", *Organization Science*, Vol. 10 No. 5, pp. 672-90.
- West, W. (2001), "Beyond conceptual framework", *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 126-31.

About the authors

Barbara A.W. Eversole is an Instructor in the Organizational Performance and Change Department in the School of Education at Colorado State University. She is also the founder and principal consultant of Transformations Unlimited Associates, an organizational consulting firm specializing in executive, management and organization development. Barbara's areas of research interest include executive coaching and decision-making, work/life issues, and using Jungian theory (personality types and archetypes) for organizational and team development. Barbara A.W. Eversole is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: beversol@cahs.colostate.edu

Gene Gloeckner has taught graduate level research design classes for nearly 25 years. He publishes books and articles related research design and methodology. He was Interim Director of the Human Resource Development program at Colorado State University for three years, Director of Graduate Programs for five years, and has directed several distance education programs.

James H. Banning is a professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University and is an environmental psychologist who studies institutional learning environments focusing on the role of nonverbal messages of cultural artifacts including messages associated with sexism and racism. He co-authored the recent book *Educating by Design: Creating Campus Environments that Work*, Jossey-Bass Publisher. Banning teaches courses in qualitative inquiry and qualitative data analysis and frequently serves as a campus ecologist consultant to institutions of higher education.