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Organizational Work-Family Support, Life Stages and Flexibility

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Over the last 30 years or so, a host of research has supported the notion that formal and informal organization work-family support can have positive consequences on employees and organizations—reducing work-family conflict and increasing family satisfaction, positive health outcomes, and perceived firm-level performance (e.g., Crain, Hammer, Bodner, Kossek, Moen, Lilienthal, & Buxton, 2014; Lee, Sudom, & Zamorski, 2013; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2010; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Ample support also exists for the notion that work-family balance continues to be important in job choice. In recent surveys, 53 percent of employees reported that greater work-life balance and better personal well-being is “very important” to them (State of the American Workplace, 2017) while work-life balance was rated as the most critical factor when evaluating a job opportunity. Work-life balance is important to parents and non-parents with 80% of working parents (Erdmann-Sullivan, 2017) and 72% of non-parents (Jay, 2017) reporting that work-life balance is the most important factor when considering a job.

My co-authors and I have found that expectant mothers, in particular, do not always feel supported. We found that many worry about negative career and image consequences of having a baby and, as a result, work hard to maintain their image (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015). We also found that this is particularly true in unsupportive environments. Women in these environments engage in image management with differential consequences on changes in work-family conflict and stress (Little, Hinojosa, Paustian-Underdahl, & Zipay, 2018). In another study, we found that following pregnancy disclosure women receive declining career encouragement despite increasing career motivation. These gender differences in career encouragement result in increases in turnover intentions (Paustian- Underdahl, Mandeville, Eaton, & Little, 2019). There is a bright spot, though. When supervisors show excitement during disclosure it improves their relationship with their employees long-term (Little, Hinojosa, & Lynch, 2017). So how can we better support our employees’ work-family balance?

Many outlets would suggest that the key to work-family balance and organizational is offering flexibility. A 2017 Deloitte Millennial Survey reported that 80% of employees surveyed suggested that organizations that allow for highly flexible work arrangements have a very/fairly positive impact on their overall work-life balance and that 81% of respondents suggested that flexibility positively impacted their productivity. Recent statistics indicate that some organizations are increasingly implementing policies aimed at work-family balance as twenty-three percent of

companies surveyed in the 2017 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends reported that they were excellent in helping employees balance personal and professional life--up from 19 percent in 2016. Thus, it seems that flexibility is a step in the right direction for improving work-life balance and is often well-received by employees.

A Lesson from Academia

Interestingly, academia is an industry that has generally embraced flexibility; and yet, work-life balance appears to continue to be elusive. Of course, often when academics report on the state of work-life balance in Academia, we primarily discuss faculty roles; it is important to remember that many (potentially the majority) of positions in academia are professional staff roles. Typically faculty, at least perceptually, have greater flexibility than professional staff; however, a recent global survey conducted by *Times Higher Education* would suggest neither faculty nor staff is particularly satisfied with the work-family balance available in academia (Bothwell, 2018). Both report believing that they are paid worse and have worse work-life balance than most of their friends outside of academia and both groups cite workload as a primary issue (Bothwell, 2018). This report goes on to show that faculty perceive less work-family than professional staff. A notion that I consider interesting given their greater access to flexible work arrangements.

Bothwell (2018) also reports that these survey results suggested that faculty believe their lack of work-family balance stems, at least in part, from the inability to block out times during the week to engage in deep thought for research. Instead, the week is filled with meetings and other potentially peripheral activities related to developing new programs or ticking off metric boxes. This proliferation of service work results in less research productivity or an increase in evening and weekend work related to research. Often faculty are given workload allocation matrices to suggest how much time should be allocated to teaching, research, and service, and yet, these are often not possible allocations given the amount of work that needs to be done and the intense pressure to publish. This pressure is exacerbated among faculty with children, particularly mothers, who may not be able to dedicate these extended hours to work. In fact, 43% of female academics report that their children hold back their careers “significantly” or “a great deal.”

Professional staff may see the more flexible working arrangements of faculty and the associated higher pay and feel underappreciated. The misconception that faculty get summers off while staff remains in the workplace also drives these equity issues. Although, professional staff report being more able to turn work off at home (24% compared to 6% of faculty) and report more comparable work-life balance to other professionals, many still struggle with this

balance as well as 43% report that their work-life balance is worse or a lot worse than that of their nonacademic friends (Bothwell, 2018).

In my opinion, research and policy need to dig deeper than simply promoting flexibility in general to consider how and when to implement flexible work policies. For example, both differences in the family unit as well as life stages may influence work-family balance needs—both within academia and outside. Also, more focus needs to be given to the implementation and communication of flexible working arrangements as well as how they influence equity issues in the organization.

Family Units and Life Stages

Dual-career couples, singles, and other family unit situations undoubtedly influence what constitutes adequate work-family balance, and yet, little research or policies seem to account for these differences. One clear way to help dual-career working mothers is to ensure the working father or significant other also has the time and opportunity to focus on work-family balance. Dads, regardless as to their thoughts on gender roles (i.e., if they were categorized as egalitarian, divided or traditional) or to what generation they belonged (Millennials to Gen X to Baby Boomers) have said that they want more time with their children (Harrington, Fraone, & Lee, 2017). However, organizations are not always structured to allow them to do so, creating an environment where it is assumed that the most productive employees are those who put their work before family life. Although many have called attention to the trickle-down effect of father's work-family balance, few studies have investigated this directly.

Additionally, very little research has investigated the different work-family needs of parents in different parenting and life stages. I do not think we can expect one size to fit all. My colleagues and I are investigating within-person changes related to work-related outcomes of parents as children age in an ongoing study. Initial results suggest that age of the child matters. Mothers with younger children are less engaged at work (Burgess, Little, & Wilson, 2018) and thus, are less likely to intend to stay in their current job. Additionally, we found that spousal support moderates this relationship such that the more spousal support a working mom receives, the more engaged she is as her children age and the more likely she is to intend to remain at her organization. Future research should continue to study how we can better understand and account for the cognitive costs of childrearing, particularly of young children, in our work-family policies. How can we help mothers of older children best utilize their increased engagement and what other struggles may parents of older children face that parents of younger children do not? Importantly, how do these life stages interact with career stages and how can we help working parents better align the two?

Along these lines, it may be important to investigate parents as a team and better understand their relative contributions to the family—also considering their life stages. For example, in a recent article, Courtney Masterson and I explore the period of reentry after maternity leave—a time when demands increase and can generate heightened levels of home stress. It is also a time that home demands weigh more heavily on the new mother. From a health perspective, newborns have biological needs that only a mother can inherently meet (e.g., breastfeeding). Additionally, social norms and pressures regarding parenthood remain gendered even for dual-earner couples. Mothers are expected to take the lead on child caregiving and managing the home, which involves routine chores as well as planning and scheduling family members' activities (Arendell, 2001; Hochschild 1989; Meisenbach, 2010; Offer & Schneider, 2011). In this study, we found that when the mother perceived organizational and spousal support both mother and SO experienced less home stress whereas SO perceptions of support did not influence either of their levels of home stress. Each parent's level of stress influenced their behaviors at home and at work. This study emphasizes the importance of crossover effects in families.

Finally, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, conclusions drawn in research and popular press tend to agree that flexibility may be vital in helping workers maintain greater work-family balance—in academia and out as well as in different life stages. However, this information alone is not sufficient for assisting organizations to improve employees' work-family balance. Faculty roles, which tend to be flexible, may be a case in point. Flexibility may not increase work-family balance when expectations keep growing. In my position as a manager, I also see challenges regarding equity and comparison-other issues across professional staff and faculty roles. Despite differences in jobs, life and family stages, employees often compare their situations to others and place a strong focus on equity. How can organizations/academia develop programs that meet individual needs but are still perceived as equitable? Additionally, more research is needed regarding the communication and implementation of programs related to flexibility and other work arrangement aimed at increasing work-family balance.

In conclusion, while progress has been made, the work-family balance remains a significant issue for both employees and organizations—within academia and outside. More research is needed to guide organizations in making flexible workplace decisions and ensuring good intentions do not go awry.

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