Employee Opinion on Work-Family Benefits: Evidence from the U.S.

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Abstract

We examine employee views on employer assistance for employees' work-family issues and the effect on two measures of employee global attitude towards the employer: *job satisfaction* and *employee attitude*. We use data from the 2002 *National Study of the Changing Workforce,* a nationally representative sample of 2,451 waged and salaried U.S. workers and a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test for mediating effects of supervisor support and workplace culture. A negative view of an employer's efforts to assist employees with work-family issues results in lower levels of job satisfaction and worsens employee attitude. Supervisor and coworker support moderated the negative effect of employee opinion of a company's work-life involvement on employee attitude, although the support had no effect on mediating the effect of the negative opinion on job satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: work-family benefits; workplace policies; employee attitudes

Introduction

A subtle shift in demographics in the American workplace has translated into what appears to be, at least according to the popular press in the United States, a "backlash" against family-friendly policies (Allerton, 2000). The number of unmarried and single U.S. residents increased by 3.3 percent between 2005 and 2006 from 89 to 92 million individuals, or 42 percent of all adults. 60 percent of those individuals had never been married, 25 percent were divorced and 15 percent were widowed (Wells, 2007). In 2000, less than one third of all households in the US had children under the age of 18 living in them (Popenoe, 2007). This was down from a half in 1960 and is projected to drop to a quarter in the coming years (*ibid.*). These demographic changes have fueled a growing number of advocacy organisations promoting the rights of single, unmarried, and/or childless individuals about what they perceive as unfair treatment in society on behalf of the government and, in particular, employers.[i] According to these groups, childless single employees "feel put upon, taken for granted and exploited—whether because of fewer benefits, less compensation, longer hours,

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mandatory overtime, or less flexible schedules or leaves—by married and child-rearing co-workers" (Wells, 2007, p. 37).

In the U.S. popular press, much has been made of worker dissatisfaction with family-friendly workplace benefits. Bella DePaulo (2006) annotates experiences and complaints from single employees about perceived work inequities on her blog and in her book *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. In her book, *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, Elinor Burkett (2000) argues that childless workers earn less money and receive fewer benefits than their coworkers who are parents. This translates into a growing number of workers without young children who are resentful because they believe they must cover for the minority of workers with young children (Poe, 2000). Jerry Steinberg, the founder of No Kidding!, a Canadian-based association for the childless with more than 40 chapters in North America, claims that "the child-burdened work less and are paid the same, or more, and we're tired of it" (Poe, 2000, p. 79). Survey results from the firm Adecco USA of Melville, N.Y. found that while employees admired working parents' "ability to do it all," 36 percent reported that flexibility at work negatively affected team dynamics and 31 percent claimed that employee morale suffered (Wells, 2007). From that same survey, 59 percent of working men between the age of 35 and 44 said that flexibility for working mothers caused resentment among coworkers (Wells, 2007). Lisa Belkin of the *New York Times* chimed in recently on the profitability of family friendly policies, reporting that in this recession some companies have begun to cut costs by eliminating their flexibility policies (2009).

To some extent, the dissatisfaction appears misplaced, given the U.S' low ranking in the world in generosity of paid family leave.[ii] The Federal Government only enacted any sort of protected leave as recently as 1993.[iii] Further, according to the U.S. Society for Human Resources, in 2000 only 37 percent of U.S. companies offered paid parental leave (and usually only to certain categories of workers), 12 percent offered paid maternity leave, 7 percent offered paid paternity leave, and only 1 percent was considering such benefits in the future (Poe, 2000). Nevertheless, the popular press has picked up on this dissatisfaction. The danger of such media-fueled backlash is that anecdotal accounts could lead to reckless inferences about the validity of investing in work-life resources. Employers could conclude that the pursuit of policies and programmes assisting workers with work-family challenges children is unworthy.

Using data from the 2002 *U.S. National Study of the Changing Workforce* (NSCW), our goal is to shed some light on the pervasiveness of workers' views on organisational support for work-family policies, and whether this view impacts a worker's global attitudes towards the organisation. This research shows that over 25 percent of U.S. workers' view work-life challenges as outside the responsibility of the employer, and further, after controlling for employee and workplace characteristics, this view negatively effects an employee's job employee's job satisfaction and attitude toward the employer.

Review of Literature

The research on the spillover between work and family has gained momentum in the last decade. This research has focused on the effect in general (Bailyn, Drago & Kochan, 2001; Barnett, Marshall & Sayer, 1992; Grzywacz, Almeida & McDonald, 2002; Jacobs & Gerson, 1998, 2001; Leiter & Durup, 1996), gender, marital, and presence of children effects (Dilworth, 2004; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Hundley, 2001), industry differences (Anderson, Morgan & Wilson, 2002), and workplace characteristics that mediate spillover and improve job satisfaction, including the amount of autonomy and pressure a worker has on the job (Anderson & Delgado, 2006; Wallen, 2002). Overwork and the loss of leisure has been the subject of several popular books, including *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work (*Hochschild, 1997), and *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Schor, 1991). It was in part due to this research that companies began instituting family-friendly policies, including on-site childcare centers, eldercare referrals, more generous parental leave policies, and flexible schedules. This began in U.S companies in the early 1980s, and really took off a decade later (Galinsky, Friedman and Hernandez, 1991).

There is a growing literature on the effect of family-friendly policies on employee attitudes and work satisfaction. Much of this literature focuses on the effect of such policies among those who use the benefits or flexibility (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brinley, 2005; Lilly, Pitt-Catsouphes & Googins, 1997; Baltes, Briggs, Huff & Neuman, 1999). Other research focuses on the effects of particular types of policies offered such as on-site childcare (Goff, Mount & Jamison, 1990; Kossek & Nichol, 1992; Miller, 1984) or telecommuting (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Duxbury, Higgins & Neufeld, 1998; Igbaria & Guimaraes, 1999), while other strands of research focus on how family-friendly policies alter workplace issues including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, turnover rates (Batt & Valcour, 2003; Allen, 2001; Behson 2002; 2005; Clark 2001; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999; Abbasi & Hollman, 2000), satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Lambert 2000; Haar & Spell, 2004; Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neil & Payne, 1989; Boles, Howard & Donofrio, 2001), and productivity (Konrad & Mangel, 2000).

Recently, however, (and possibly in response to the media focus on backlash against family friend policies) the literature has begun to explore the effect of family-friendly programmes among non-users and on notions of fairness and justice within organisations between single, childless workers and those workers with families (Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke & O'Dell, 1998; Grover, 1991). There is evidence, for example, that simply offering family-friendly options can have a positive impact on employee attitudes, regardless of whether employees actually use the programmes (Grover & Crooker, 1995). Other research shows that such policies are mainly intended for and used by workers with families (Young, 1997a, 1997b; Parkinson, 1996).

Authors have also documented perceptions of unfairness among childless workers. In a survey of 78 companies conducted by the Conference Board, Parkinson (1996) reports that 75 percent of workers said that their company was not adequately addressing childless employee's needs. In another survey, Flynn (1996) showed that 81 percent of employees

believed that single employees "end up carrying more of the burden than married employees" (p. 59). Still, other studies document different treatment of single employees versus employees with families (Casper, Herst & Swanberg, 2003; Casper, Weltman & Kwegisa, 2006) including social exclusion (Casper et al., 2006), unequal work opportunities (Flynn, 1996; Young 1999), unequal access to employee benefits (Grandey, 2001; Rothausen, et al., 1998; Grover, 1991; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Parker & Allen, 2001; Young 1996; Lambert, 2000) and unequal respect for nonwork roles (Young, 1999; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Casper et al. 2003).

Two recent studies from New Zealand have explored the question of worker backlash against colleagues with children. Haar and Spell (2003) and Haar, et al (2004) examine the relationship between employee non-utilisation of work-family practices and attitudes towards satisfaction, turnover, commitment, and support. Each study uses employee data from New Zealand local government organisations with seven work-family practices: unpaid parental leave, paid parental leave, domestic leave bereavement leave, an employee assistant programme, flexible working hours, and before and after-school childcare. The authors in both studies found that, although non-users of work-family programmes have strong negative feelings towards work-family practices, the negative attitudes do not lead to a backlash against more global attitudes towards the organisation, such as job satisfaction and job-turnover intention.

We intend to mirror these two studies with a unique U.S. dataset that focuses on work-family issues in the workplace, although with three significant changes. We use a direct measure of employee attitude towards organisational assistance in employees' work-family issues rather than usage of work-family benefits as the pivotal independent variable. In addition, we use two control variables for workplace culture: job pressure and amount of autonomy. Finally, we use two measures of factors that would potentially mediate a negative relationship between employee dissatisfaction with employer involvement in work-family issues and global attitudes towards the company: supervisor support and workplace culture.

Data and Methods

The data for this research come from the 2002 *National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW)*, conducted under the auspices of the Family and Work Institute (Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1998). The NSCW provides a nationally representative sample of U.S workers. Due to their likely control over their schedule, individuals who categorised themselves as exclusively self-employed were deleted from the sample and only waged and salaried workers were investigated. The 2002 NSCW has a total sample of 2,810 waged and salaried workers. After cases with non-responses were excluded, we were left with a sample of 2,454.

The two measures of employee global attitude towards the employer used as the dependent variables are *job satisfaction* and *employee attitude*. *Job satisfaction* is measured using an index of two separate questions from the 2002 NSCW: "How satisfied are you with your job?" and "Would you take the same job again?" The scale has reliability (Cronbach Alpha)

of .78. *Employee attitude* towards the employer is measured using an index of two separate questions: "Do you work harder than you have to for the company?" and "How loyal do you feel toward your employer?" The scale has reliability (Cronbach Alpha) of .68. For each scale, a higher number is associated with more job satisfaction and a better employee attitude towards the company, respectively.

The independent variable of interest is a dichotomous variable in which the respondent is asked whether he/she agrees or disagrees with the statement that "work-family problems are workers' problems and not the company's" (0=disagree, 1=agree). The need for controlling for the potential effects of employee characteristics has been noted in the work-family research cited above. Individual and/or family level variables that are hypothesised to predict job satisfaction and employee attitude towards the employer include respondent's sex, whether a spouse or partner is present in the household, level of education, and the presence of children under 13 in the household.

Relevant working conditions that have been found to effect job satisfaction and attitude are reflected in pressure, and autonomy on the job. These variables are available as indexes in the NSCW (Bond et. al., 1998). An index of job pressure averages three questions found in Table 1 that employ a 4-point Likert scale (Cronbach alpha = .47). The index ranges from 1=low pressure to 4=high pressure. Autonomy on the job (Cronbach alpha = .67), takes the mean of the three items and ranges from 1= low autonomy to 4 = high autonomy.

Supervisor and coworker support indices are also provided in the dataset. Supervisor support averages the means of nine items (Cronbach alpha = .88), and ranges from 1 = low support to 4 = high support. The coworker support index (Cronbach alpha = .74) averages the level of agreement to three questions and ranges from 1 = low coworker support to 4 = high coworker support. Table 1 presents a listing of the variables, definitions, and descriptive statistics.

Table 1: **Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics by Work-Family Question Response: Valid % / Mean (Std. Error)**

Variable Name	Variable Definition	"Work-Family problems are the worker's problems and not the company's"	
		Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree
JOB SATISFACTION***	Index of two questions: "How satisfied are you with your job?" and "Would you take the same job again?" Higher number=higher satisfaction	3.521 (.014)	3.033 (.030)
EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE***	Index of two questions:" Do you work harder than you have to for the company" and "How loyal do you feel toward your employer?" Higher number=better attitude	.088 (.017)	-.244 (.032)
JOB PRESSURE***	Index of 3 items: "Job Requires that I work very fast"; "Job Requires that I work very hard"; and "Never have enough time to get everything done on the job" 1=low pressure to 4=high pressure	2.837 (.016)	3.090 (.025)
AUTONOMY***	Index of 3 items: "Freedom to decide what I do on my job"; "Own responsibility to decide how job gets done"; and "I have a lot of say about what happens on my job" 1=low autonomy to 4=high autonomy	3.038 (2.691)	2.691 (.030)
COWORKER SUPPORT***	Index of 3 items: "I feel part of the group of the people I work with"; "I have the coworker support I need to do a good job"; "I have the coworker support I need to manage work/family life" 1= low support to 4= high support	3.534 (.012)	3.157 (.027)
SUPERVISOR SUPPORT***	Index of 9 items: "My sup keeps me informed of things I need to do job well"; "My sup has realistic expectations of my job performance"; "My sup recognizes when I do a good job"; "My sup is supportive when I have a work problem"; "My sup is fair when responding to employee personal/family needs'; "My sup accommodates me when I have family/personal issues"; "I feel comfortable bringing up personal/family issues with my sup"; "My sup cares about effects of work on personal/family life" 1= low support to 4=high support	3.493 (.012)	3.009 (.030)
AGE***	Respondent's age	41.84 (.287)	38.46 (.463)
SPOUSE/PARTNER IN RESIDENCE**	0=No 1=Yes	33.5% 66.5%	38.0% 62.0%
FEMALE***	0=male 1=female	47.8% 52.2%	60.5% 39.5%
PRESENCE OF KIDS < 13 YEARS**	0=No 1=Yes	67.9% 32.1%	63.1% 36.9%
EDUCATION: Post Secondary Education***	0=No 1=Yes	37.9% 62.1%	52.1% 47.9%
N			2454
%		73.4%	26.6%

Source: 2002 National Study of Changing Workforce
*p<.10 **p<.05 ***p<.01

Descriptive characteristics based on whether respondents agree or disagree with the question "work-family problems are workers' problems and not the company's" are presented in Table 1. Approximately a quarter of the respondents agree with the statement. Workers who agree with the statement have significantly lower mean levels of job satisfaction and attitude towards the employer than those who disagree with the statement. The independent variables also reveal a great deal of significant differences. Workers in agreement with the statement report more job pressure, less autonomy, and less support from their supervisor and coworkers than their counterparts. They are also younger, more likely to be male, less likely to have post-secondary education and more likely to have children less than 13 years of age; results that conform to our expectations, except the last one. It is quite possible, however, that having children under the age of 13 is highly correlated with another variable, such as age, which is driving the unexpected result.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was done to test the hypotheses that opinion of organisational involvement in a worker's work-family problems affects the level of job satisfaction and employee attitude toward the employer. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis is the use of ordinary least squares estimation and adding blocks of explanatory variables. The hierarchy keeps the main independent variable, opinion of the responsibility for work-family problems while adding more explanatory variables to determine the level of predictive improvement in the model from each block. Thus, the work-family opinion question was entered as the first block, the demographic control variables were entered as the second block, and the working condition variables were entered as the third block. To test for moderating effects of supervisor and coworker support, these variables were added in step 4.

The base estimation equation is as follows:

$$Job\ Satisfaction_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(work\text{-}family_i\ ) + u_i$$
$$Employee\ Attitude_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(work\text{-}family_i\ ) + u_i$$

Recall that Harr and Spell (2003) and Harr, et al (2004) examined the relationship between non-utilisation of work-family policies and attitudes and found that negative feelings about the policies did not translated into negative global attitudes about the organisation. This suggests the (β_1) coefficient would be insignificant. However, popular media reports on dissatisfaction with family-friendly policies suggest we should expect coefficient (β_1) to be negative. (The work-family question asks whether the individual feels that work-life problems are the responsibility of the worker, where work-family equals 1 if the respondent agrees and equals 0 if the respondent disagrees). This would mean that those who agree that work-family problems are the responsibility of the worker, not the employer, have lower job satisfaction and a poor employee attitude. The estimation equations with the additional levels of explanatory variables are summarised as follows:

$$Job\ Satisfaction_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(work\text{-}family_i) + \beta_2(demographics_i) + \beta_3(workplace\ conditions_i)$$
$$+ \beta_4(support_i) + u_i$$
$$Employee\ Attitude_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(work\text{-}family_i) + \beta_2(demographics_i) + \beta_3(workplace\ conditions_i)$$
$$+ \beta_4(support_i) + u_i$$

We expect that the coefficients on job pressure should be negative for both job satisfaction and attitude while the coefficients on the level of autonomy should be positive. It is not clear in the literature whether the demographic variables should positively or negatively effect job satisfaction and attitude. Supervisor and coworker support should have a positive effect on satisfaction and attitude.

Results

Results of the regression analyses appear in Table 2. The results in models 1 and 5 reveal that agreement with the work-family statement results in lower job satisfaction and worsens employee attitude. The significance of this independent variable does not change with the addition of the demographic characteristics, shown in models 2 and 6. For both equations, the demographic characteristics offer additional predictive power (job satisfaction: F change=7.106, p=.000; employee attitude: F change=6.174, p=.000). Age is positively related to job satisfaction and employee attitude. Being female does not affect job satisfaction, but is significantly related to a better attitude towards the employer. Having a spouse or partner in residence leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, but is insignificant in the employee attitude model. Finally, education and the presence of children less that 13 years of age does not affect job satisfaction, although not having post secondary education and having children under 13 leads to a better attitude.

Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results

Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results								
Dependent Variable	Job Satisfaction				Employee Attitude			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Work-Family Problems	-.611'''	-.586'''	-.457'''	-.197'''	-.313'''	-.307'''	-.237'''	.034
	(.038)	(.039)	(.038)	(.035)	(.037)	(.037)	(.037)	(.036)
Age		.006'''	.004'''	.005'''		.005'''	.004'''	.005'''
		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Female		.035	.081''	.043		.074''	.115'''	.085'''
		(.034)	(.0323)	(.029)		(.033)	(.032)	(.029)
Marital Status		.113'''	.118'''	.112'''		.012	.004	.000
		(.038)	(.036)	(.032)		(.037)	(.035)	(.033)
Education		.020	-.017	.059''		-.084''	-.150'''	-.091'''
		(.034)	(.036)	(.029)		(.033)	(.032)	(.030)
Kids less than 13		.033	.014	.014		.104'''	.075''	.073''
		(.038)	(.017)	(.032)		(.018)	(.038)	(.033)
Pressure			-.148'''	-.078'''			.068'''	.124'''
			(.023)	(.021)			(.023)	(.021)
Autonomy			.317'''	.149'''			.291'''	.162'''
			(.021)	(020)			(.021)	(.020)
Supervisor Support				.313'''				.271'''
				(.028)				(.029)
Coworker Support				.441'''				.310'''
				(.028)				(.029)
Constant	.151	-.199	-.665	-3.089	.085	-.146	-1.151	-3.026
Adj. R-square	0.094	0.106	0.193	0.368	.028	.038	.113	.234

: 2002 National Study of Changing Workforce
' p<.10 '' p<.05 ''' p<.01

Models 3 and 7 add the working conditions variables and in both, job autonomy and pressure significantly affect satisfaction and attitude, although while higher levels of autonomy relate to higher levels of satisfaction and attitude, more pressure relates to lower job satisfaction, as expected, but a better attitude towards the employer. The positive effect of job pressure on employee attitude was unexpected, but it could mean job pressure is interpreted by the employee as measuring his or her importance to the employer. The effect of work-family opinion on both job satisfaction and attitude was mitigated somewhat by adding this additional block of explanatory variables, but the negative effect remains significant.

Further, for both groups of workers, adding working conditions offers additional predictive power beyond that contributed by individual and family characteristics (job satisfaction: F change=133.332, p=.000; employee attitude: F change=103.989, p=.000). The independent

variables significant in model 6 retain their significant relationship to employee attitude in model 7. However, although the independent variables of age and marital status retain their significant relationship to job satisfaction in model 3 with the addition of the working variables, being female becomes significant, suggesting that the gender effect was suppressed in model 2 for these workers.

Finally, the additions of coworker and supervisor support variables in models 4 and 8 have differing effects. In model 8, not only are they significantly and positively related to employee attitude, but their addition has made work-family opinion no longer related to attitude, indicating they have moderated the negative impact of the work-family opinion. However, while the two support variables are significantly related to job satisfaction, work-family opinion continues to affect job satisfaction, indicating that the finding is robust. As a whole, support adds significantly to satisfaction (F change=339.115, p=.000) and for employee attitude (F change= 188.165, p=.000).

Differences in the effects of the independent variables on the two dependent variables raise an important question concerning worker productivity. Which is more harmful: a negative attitude towards the *employer* or towards the employee's *job*? In other words, is an employee more likely to leave the company or engage in other actions that hurt productivity if he or she is unhappy with the *job* or with the *employer*? Although this paper does not address this question, it does suggest that high supervisor and coworker support in job-related and family-related issues reduces negative feelings an employee may have towards the employer that offers generous work-family benefits. The mediating effect is not seen, however, in the job satisfaction model. The persistence of dissatisfaction with a company's assistance with work-family issues despite the introduction of other explanatory variables, most importantly supervisor and coworker support, suggests the handling of work-family benefits can be a delicate and complicated endeavour.

Conclusion

While there has been much international research on the benefits of work-family policies for employees and the organisation, there has been limited research on what workers think about employer involvement in an employee's work-family problems. The most significant findings of this research using U.S. data are that over a quarter of U.S. workers' view work-life challenges as outside the responsibility of the employer, and further, after controlling for employee and workplace characteristics, this view negatively effects an employee's job satisfaction and attitude toward the employer, although supervisor and coworker support mediates the effect on attitude. This result differs from the New Zealand studies mentioned earlier that concluded the potential for backlash is insignificant and overblown by the media. In fact, this research suggests that serious attention should be paid to human resource policies that promote cafeteria plans, providing "something for everyone".

Notes

ⁱ Three of these associations are The Childfree Network, The American Association of Single People and The World Childfree Association

ⁱⁱ Australia and the U.S. are the only two OECD countries without a national programme of compensated birth and adoption leave. The Australian government, however, provides a significant lump-sum birth grant and also income-tested family benefit payments to families with one-earner (Brusentsev & Vroman, 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ In the U.S., parents may take up to 12 weeks unpaid for childbirth or care of a child up to 12 months of age as part of the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act, although employers with fewer than 50 employees are exempt. Five states and Puerto Rico provide some benefit payments to parents missing work around the time of childbirth [California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Puerto Rico] (Susan Kell Associates, 2007).

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