

Context-specific Stressors, Work-related Social Support and Work-Family Conflict: A Mediation Study

STEPHEN T.T. TEO*, CAMERON NEWTON** and KARINA SOEWANTO***

Abstract

Understanding the antecedents of work-family conflict is important as it allows organisations to effectively engage in work design for professional employees. This study examines the impact of sources of social support as antecedents of work-family conflict. The hypotheses were tests using Partial Least Squares modelling on a sample of 366 professional employees. The path model showed that context-specific stressors impacted positively on job demand, which led to higher levels of work-family conflict. Contrary to our expectation, non-work related social support did not have any statistical relationship with job demand and work-family conflict. In addition, individuals experiencing high job demands were found to obtain more social support from both work and non-work-related sources. Individuals with more work-related social support were less likely to have less work-family conflict. Surprisingly, non-work social support sources had no statistically significant relationship with work-family conflict.

Key words: professional service, stressors, social support, work-family conflict, mediation

Introduction

Professional employees are working longer hours than ever before, resulting in reduced time spent with their families. This is particularly the case for service-related professions (e.g. accountants, lawyers, etc). There exists a considerable body of literature that has investigated the potential negative impact of work interfering with the family domain. One such example is work-family conflict (WFC). WFC has been shown to have a negative impact on organisational, family, and personal outcomes (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1997; Yildirim & Ayca, 2008). WFC has also been shown to be the consequence of job stress (Pal & Saksvik, 2008) and be negatively associated with job performance indicators (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried & Cooper, 2008). This is similar to the same conceptualisation of WFC as Carlson and Perrewé (1999).

Social support from both work and non-work sources has been studied in relation to its effect in reducing the negative consequences of work intensification. Various scholars such as Haar (2008) concluded that work-related social support (such as a supportive supervisor) has a negative relationship with WFC. Social support has been shown to reduce time demands, and thus, indirectly decrease WFC (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999). While some studies show that social support has a mediation effect (e.g., Carlson & Perrewé, 1999), others argue that it has a buffer effect, where social support is treated as a moderator (Lawrence, 2006). Despite these studies, there have not been any studies which simultaneously examine the mediation and moderation effects in the same model. This will be the aim of the current study.

*Stephen T.T. Teo, AUT University

**Cameron Newton, Queensland University of Technology

*** Karina Soewanto, University of Technology Sydney

Stressors, Social Support and Work-Family Conflict

The literature shows that stressors related to service work have been well-documented. At the broadest level, some researchers have described the work of customer service employees as monotonous (e.g., in terms of repetitive tasks) and demanding (e.g., in terms of quality and quantity of tasks to complete), and ultimately a source of strain for those holding such positions (Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Stressors are situated at the beginning of the causal relationships. In the current paper, we adopted Ganster's (2008: 260) definition where stressors refer to:

...some environmental events or conditions, exposure to which is hypothesized to cause changes in mental and physical well-being... [the] concern is with events and conditions of a psychosocial nature, ones such as pressure to meet a deadline, conflicting role demands, verbal abuse, threat of layoff, work overload, and lack of control.

Recent research showed that Australian public sector employees experienced a variety of stressors related to service provision due to the introduction of service orientation (Noblet, Teo, McWilliams & Rodwell, 2005). As a result, several stressors were identified, which impact negatively on employees' work attitudes. Indeed, there are a large number of empirical studies across all organisational settings that have investigated work stressors and employee outcomes, along with several meta-analytic reviews (see Abramis, 1994; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006).

Hypothesis 1. Higher levels of Context-specific stressors are positively related to perceived job demands.

Occupational stress theories and related empirical studies suggest that the relationship between job stressors and employee adjustment is not as simple and direct as purported by some models in the literature. Indeed, researchers have identified a considerable number of potential intervening variables of the work stressor-adjustment process that add complexity to the nature of the occupational stress process (see Perrewé & Ganster, 2002, for review). In particular, studies have shown that social support could have an important effect on employee well-being generally, including work-family balance.

Pal and Saksvik (2008) noted sources of social support at the workplace have been found to help employees cope with the stress from work intensification. Indeed, it is well documented that high levels of demands that result from workplace stress facilitate levels of social instrumental support (i.e., work-based support and assistance provided by colleagues and/or supervisors) as a cost effective way of assisting employees to meet demands. Similarly, non-work social support is elicited when friends express feelings of being overwhelmed by their workload. From another perspective, it can also be noted that higher levels of stressors can signify that support in the workplace or outside of the workplace is lacking, in line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hence, such a lack of support can mean that employees are missing a vital coping resource which can magnify the perception of events that may be considered stressors in the workplace (see Levine, Cassidy, Brazier & Reicher, 2002).

Hypothesis 2. Higher levels of Context-specific stressors are negatively related to work (H2a) and non-work (H2b) related social support.

Hypothesis 3. Higher levels of job demands are positively related to work (H3a) and non-work (H3b) related social support.

Work-Family Conflict (WFC)

The advent of computer technology and mobile access, globalisation, and increasing work demands have resulted in the increasing intrusion of our work lives on our family lives. This situation is described in the literature as work-family conflict (WFC) and has attracted considerable research attention in non-customer service domains. WFC is defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985: 77) as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect”. Specifically, WFC exists when the time, strain and behaviours required by one role make it difficult to fulfil the requirements of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Therefore, WFC is conceptualised as a strain (see Carlson & Perrewé, 1999).

More recently Shaffer, Joplin and Hsu (2011: 225) noted that researchers conducting WFC have recognised the “bidirectional relationship between work and family life”. Meta-analysis undertaken by Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton (2000) highlights the potential negative consequences of WFC. This role strain hypothesis suggests that individuals have a limited amount of psychological resources, time, and energy, and that strain occurs when the demands of multiple roles exceed these resources (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Inspection of the literature suggests that many antecedents of WFC include job demand, and work social support. More recently, meta-analytic review by Michel, Kortrba, Mitchelson, Clark, and Baltes (2011) identified antecedents of WFC including work role stressors (such as job stressors and time demands). Similarly Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley (2005) identified antecedents of WFC to include work domain variables, such as job stress; non-work domain variables, such as family demands and marital conflict, and individual and demographic variables. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that factors, such as work pressure, and unpredictability in work routines (such as that which might be experienced by customer service employees responding to multiple and unexpected client demands) have significant and positive relationships to WFC (e.g., Fox & Dwyer, 1999).

Hypothesis 4. Higher levels of Context-specific stressors are positively related to WFC.

Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of job demands are positively related to WFC.

In general, differing levels and types of social support has been found to be an antecedent of different levels of reported WFC (Seiger & Wiese, 2009). For instance, work-related social support, such as supportive supervisor can reduce WFC (see Greenhaus, Bedeian & Mossholder, 1987; Haar 2008). Carlson and Perrewé (1999) found that social support at work may reduce perceived role stressors and time demands, and thus, indirectly decrease WFC. More specifically, these authors found that work social support was related to lower levels of job-related conflict, time pressures, and ambiguity, which, in turn, results in lower levels of WFC (Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler & Cullen, 2010). Meta-analysis by Kossek, Pichler, Bodner and Hammer (2011) identified two sources of work-related social support. They noted that supervisor support and organisation support were both found to be more strongly related to lower levels of WFC than general supervisor support. Non-work social support sources, such as family, spouse and friends, have also been studied. Family (or non-work) social support was found to be related to lower levels of family role conflict and ambiguity, and subsequent lower levels of WFC (Michel et al., 2010).

Hypothesis 6. Higher levels of work (H5a) and non-work social support (H5b) are negatively related to WFC.

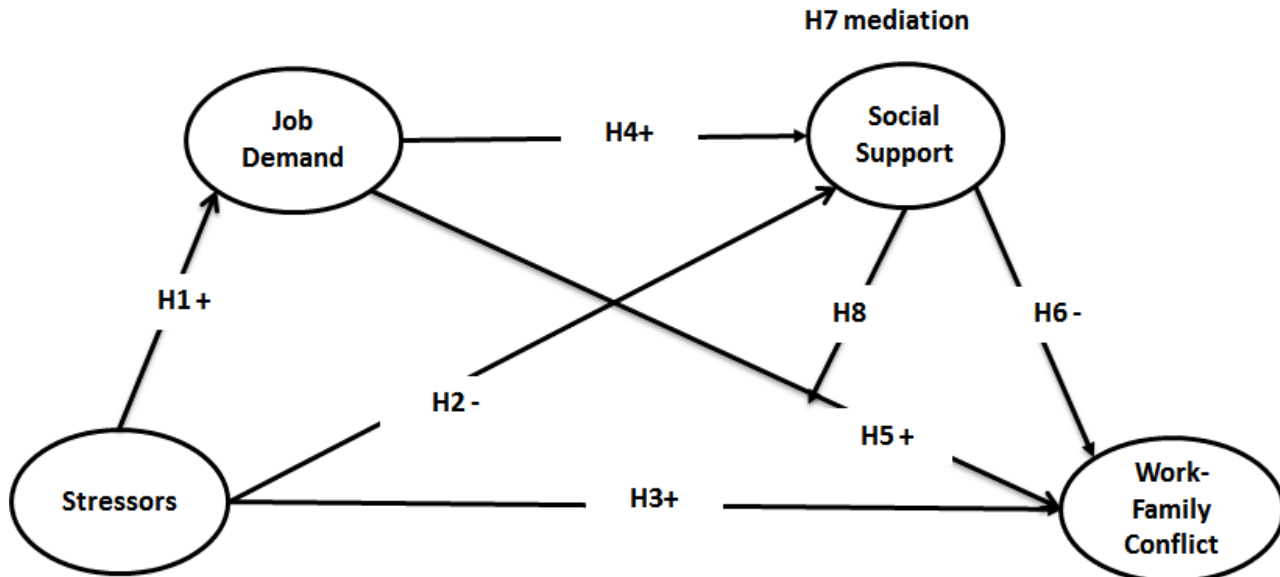
Hypothesis 7. Higher levels of work (H6a) and non-work social support (H6b) mediates the effect of work stressors on WFC such that higher levels of Context-specific stressors will lead to higher levels of support and lower WFC.

It is important to note that a significant amount of research has been conducted investigating the ability of social support to moderate or buffer the potential negative impact of job stress on job-related attitudes and health. Viswesvaran, Sanchez and Fisher (1999) conducted meta-analyses of research that investigated the moderating role of social support on the work stressor-adjustment relationship. Generally, the researchers found that the interaction of work stressors and social support explained significant additional variance with the presence of social support (in its various forms) reducing the negative effects of work stressors on employee strain. Furthermore, a considerable body of literature has provided some support for Karasek and Theorell’s (1990) theorised strain-and-buffer hypotheses relating to the demand, decision latitude, and social support interactions (see also Karasek, 1979; Theorell & Karasek, 1996; van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Interestingly, however, some studies have found a reverse-buffering effect for social support, such that it can accentuate the impact of a work stressor on strain (e.g., Glaser, Tatum, Nebeker, Sorenson & Aiello, 1999). To this extent, Beehr and Glazer (2001) suggest that these results might be a function of cultural context, and that different cultures and cultural characteristics (ethnic, in this case) might be related to perceptions of social support. Overall, there is a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical evidence supporting the notion that the work stressor-adjustment relationship can be moderated by social support.

Hypothesis 8. Higher levels of work (H7a) and non-work social support (H7b) will buffer the negative consequences of context-specific job stressors on WFC.

The present study develops a model to examine the influence of work and non-work social support on WFC in the context of professional service. Partial Least Squares Modelling was employed to test the hypotheses displayed in the path model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proposed Model of Professional Service Employees and Context-specific Job Stressors



Methods

Sample and Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to 592 employees, with 366 completed and usable questionnaires returned (response rate = 61.8 percent). Questionnaires were distributed to professional service employees working in small and medium-sized profit and not-for-profit organisations in sectors, such as finance and insurance, legal and business services. The participants were recruited from a postgraduate business course in a large, metropolitan university in Australia. Surveys were completed anonymously in paper-based format and participants then posted the completed survey back to the researcher using a reply-paid envelope. Prior to the survey phase, we conducted five focus groups to validate the context-specific stressors developed by Noblet et al. (2005) and their applicability in the service context. A total of 25 participants working in a high customer and/or client contact role participated in the sessions (note: reliability coefficients are reported in Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations

	Mean	SD	AVE	Alpha	1	2	3	4	5
1. Context-Specific Stressors	3.28	.87	.53	.85	<u>.73</u>				
2. Job Demand	3.68	.74	.54	.83	.43***	<u>.74</u>			
3. Work-related Social Support	4.30	1.08	.41	.83	-.21***	.10	<u>.64</u>		
3. Non-Work-related Social Support	4.87	1.08	.48	.90	-.04	.13*	.40***	<u>.69</u>	
5. Work-Family Conflict	2.86	.88	.56	.74	.45***	.37***	-.12*	.03	<u>.75</u>

Note:

N=366 professional employees

*p<.05

***p<.001

Underlined and italicised numbers represent the square of the average variance estimates. These were used to determine the discriminant analysis (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Measures

Work-family conflict. We used four items reflecting work interference with family developed by Kopelman, Greenhaus and Connolly (1983, cited in Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991). Following Judge and Colquitt (2004) who used the same scale, they were used to operationalise work-family conflict. An example item is 'My family or friends dislike how often I am preoccupied with my work while I am at home' with items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), so that a high value signifies more WFC.

Context-specific stressors. Respondents were asked to respond to a 33-item situation-specific stressors scale that required them to indicate the extent that each of the factors listed was a source of stress in their job on a

five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (major source of stress). These were used to examine the Context-specific stressors of a sample of public sector employees employed in customer service roles. Stressors that were rated by at least 70 percent of respondents as being a moderate, large or major source of stress (that is, a score of three, four or five on the five-point scale) were retained for further analysis. These items were 'Lack of human resources to accomplish tasks', 'Unclear expectations', 'Unrealistic performance targets', 'Heavy workloads', 'Not having enough time to do job as well as you would like', 'Other staff not pulling their weight', and 'Insufficient staff to complete work on time and to standard expected'. These items were incorporated into the path model as a formative scale as we argued that all seven context-specific stressors are necessary in inducing stress at work for professional service employees.

Job Demand. Job demand was measured by adopting the 11 item scale from the scale adopted from Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, and Pinneau (1980). The first set of five items was rated from '1' (rarely) to '5' (very often). Sample item included 'How often does your job require you to work very fast?'. The second set of statements required respondents to apply each statement to their jobs and respond on a five-point scale ranging from '1' (hardly any) to '5' (a great deal). Sample item included 'What quantity of work do others expect you to do?'. Discriminant analysis on *SmartPLS* resulted in a final set of six items. High score indicates high job demand.

Social Support. Etzion (1984) identified two different types of social support. Participants were asked to respond to a statement and indicate the level of support presence in their work environment. An example item of work-related support is 'To what extent do you get appreciation and recognition for what you do in your work life and life outside of work?'. Each of these statements was rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much).

Data analysis technique

We utilised *SmartPLS* v.2, (Ringle, Wende & Will, 2005), a form of structural equation modelling, to analyse the model. *SmartPLS* is a technique used for estimating path coefficients in causal models and the software allows for the simultaneous testing of hypotheses. Survey data were input to SPSS v.17 to calculate descriptive statistics and inter-correlations.

The path coefficients are standardised regression coefficients and the loadings are similar to factor loadings. The significance of each variable to another is then determined according to the bootstrap procedure (note: bootstrap was undertaken with 500 samples). PLS differs from LISREL as it is suitable for the analysis of small samples while the latter requires substantially larger samples. Another advantage of using PLS over LISREL is that PLS does not require multivariate normal data. Given the number of variables in the proposed model, the sample size is within the range considered to be suitable for PLS analysis (Chin & Newstead, 1999).

Validity and reliability Issues

Validity and reliability of the reflective constructs are checked by examining the average variance extracted (AVE). Most of the AVE computed are greater than 0.5. Furthermore, comparison of these reliabilities with inter-construct correlations display adequate discriminant validity as the square root of the AVE for each construct is much larger than its correlation with any other construct (Venaik, Midgley & Devinney, 2005).

The quality of the proposed structural model was determined using R-square of the dependent variables and the Stone-Geisser Q-square test for predictive relevance (see Chin, 2010). We ran two separate analyses with

10 and 25 omission distance in order to test the stability of the results. Since the values are stable for both omission distances and the majority of the Q-squares were greater than zero, we were confident that the model is stable and the predictive relevance requirement is satisfied.

Harman's ex-post one factor test was also used to ensure that the current study did not suffer from common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). All the variables used in the study were entered into an unrotated factor analysis to determine the number of factors. If a single factor emerges from the factor analysis, this would indicate that the data suffered from a common method variance problem. The analysis showed that there were six factors (with eigenvalues greater than 1.0) which explained 64.1 percent of the variance. This finding provided support that common method variance is not an issue in the current study.

Findings

366 professional service employees participated in the study. They were employed in industries including Finance and Insurance (40.7 percent), Manufacturing (10.4 percent), and Agricultural, Forestry, and Fishing (9.8 percent). The three largest groups of nationalities were those born in Indonesia (34.4 percent), Australia (33.3 percent), and Hong Kong (29.8 percent). There was equal number of males and females who participated in the study. Most of the respondents were employed by private sector organisations. Nearly half of the respondents were employed in organisations with greater than 1,000 employees. Most of the respondents have more than three years of full time equivalent working experience with their current employer. Nearly half of the respondents were employed in operational and non-supervisory positions and nearly half of the respondents spent more than 50 hours per week on servicing internal and or external customers.

The model explained 19.4 percent of the dependent variable, WFC. The global goodness of fit index (Tenenhouse, Vinzi, Chatelin & Lauro, 2005) was 0.26, which indicated that the model has a medium goodness of fit (Wetzels, Oderkerken-Schröder & van Oppen, 2009). Results from the bootstrapping are reported in Table 2 and results of the path analysis are illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 2. Results of Path Analysis

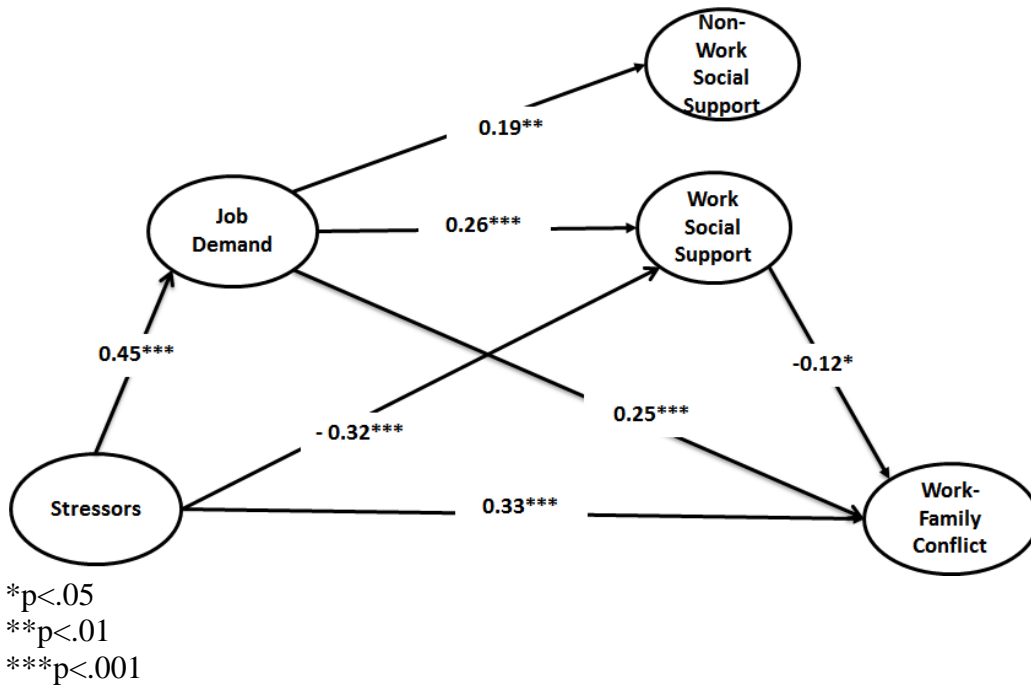
Paths	Path Coefficients	t-statistic	Sig. level
H1. Stressors → Job Demand	0.45	9.8117	***
H2a. Stressors → Work Social Support	-0.32	5.5090	***
H3. Stressors → Work-Family Conflict	0.33	5.6291	***
H4a. Job Demand → Work Social Support	0.26	3.7034	***
H4b. Job Demand → Non-Work Social Support	0.19	3.1280	**
H5. Job Demand → Work-Family Conflict	0.25	4.4634	***
H6a. Work Social Support → Work-Family Conflict	-0.12	1.9825	*

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001

Figure 2. Final Model of Context-specific Job Stressors and WFC



The path from context-specific stressors to job demand was positive and significant. There was support for Hypothesis 1. The path from Context-specific stressors to work social support was negative and significant, providing support for Hypothesis 2a. However, the hypothesised path from Context-specific stressors to non-work social support was not supported. The path from work context stressors to WFC was found to be positive and statistically significant; thus, providing support from Hypothesis 3. There was a positive and significant path from job demand to work social support and non-work social support, supporting Hypothesis 4. As predicted by Hypothesis 5, job demand was positively associated with WFC. The path from work social support to WFC was negative and significant. There was support for Hypothesis 6a. On the other hand, the hypothesised path from non-work social support to WFC was not supported.

To test for the mediation hypothesis, a Sobel’s test was conducted which showed that work social support partially mediates the relation between context-specific stressors and WFC (Sobel’s=2.8970, p=0.004). Hypothesis 7a was supported. A hierarchical regression analysis was undertaken to test the moderation hypothesis, with stressors as the independent variable and work social support as the moderation variable. The analysis showed that the interaction of stressors and work social support was not significant in the prediction of WFC.

Discussion and Implications

The present study sought to investigate the impact of Context-specific stressors and job characteristics on WFC in a sample of 366 professional service employees. Overall, the path model is stable and the data showed a medium goodness of fit. In the current study, two antecedents of WFC were identified. These were job demand and work-related social support. Work-related social support was found to mediate and moderate the relationship between Context-specific stressors and WFC.

Context-specific stressors were found to have a direct and positive impact on the WFC of professional service employees. These stressors also have a positive impact on job demands, which subsequently increase the level of WFC. The set of context-specific stressors that led to higher job demand tends to relate to situations where there were insufficient staffing level, unrealistic performance target and expectations, and the fast pace of working in a service environment. In an era where firms rely on their frontline employees to be competitive, it is crucial that work redesign activities be implemented to retain these professional employees.

Consistent with prior studies (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000; Kossek et al., 2011), there was support for the negative consequences of an increase job demands on work-family domain. There was support for treating work-related social support as an independent antecedent to WFC. In addition, work social support was found to have a partial mediating effect on the relationship between context-specific stressors on WFC. This finding highlights the critical role of work-related social support. This finding corroborates the finding by Carlson and Perrewé (1999), Haar (2008), and Seiger and Wiese (2009).

Surprisingly, non-work social support sources were less important as professional service employees seek assistance and support with WFC from their peers and supervisors. Non-work social support did not have any effect on work-family conflict. This finding makes sense and can be potentially explained by the notion that instrumental social support “at work” reduces potential ambiguity and professional service context-specific stressors on the job, and also affords an individual further informational and possibly the resources required to meet the demand. As such, managers should ensure that team-based cultures are facilitated and promoted to ensure employees value and behave in ways related to helping others and working together to get the work completed.

Limitations and Future Research Implications

Overall, several limitations and, therefore, future research directions can be noted with respect to this study. In particular, it would be beneficial for future researchers to explore the present model in a specific occupation (such as lawyers) and industry (e.g., frontline employees in manufacturing industry). Researchers can also further unpack the impact of different types of stressors examined in this model and how professional service employees cope with the stressors, similar to the study by Yagil, Luria and Gal (2008).

Our findings should also be interpreted with care as the results could be affected by common method bias. Future study should collect the dependent variable from different time period in order to minimise the effect of common method biasness. However, given the number of checks undertaken in the present study, we are confident that the effect of common method bias is of no major concern.

Managerial Implications

A managerial implication of the current study is that a reduction in job demand may possibly lower the level of stress experienced, which eventually also reduces any harmful effects of context-specific job stressors in a professional service environment. In today’s market-driven economy, reducing job demand may appear incompatible, especially when there is a requirement for high productivity. Excessive organisational bureaucracy and poorly organised work systems resulted in employees having to work harder and faster in order to cope (Keeley & Harcourt, 2001); hence, simplification of rules, structures and systems would result in higher productivity and lower stress level.

Another managerial implication is to provide flexible work opportunities (Haar & Roche, 2008) and ensure supervisors can support them via strategies which encourage and recognise the needs for work-family balance of these employees (Boyar, Maertz, Mosley & Carr, 2008). Strategies, such as provision of training of supervisors and or managers to be more work-family supportive, the creation of a work-family supportive organisational culture, and the selection and development of supervisors/managers in providing positive workplace social support for work-family specific issues (Kossek et al., 2011), could be implemented to minimise the negative consequences of context specific stressors. One cannot ignore the justice implications when supervisors/managers are given charge to decide how motivational strategies (such as encouragement, access to resources, etc) for employees (Judge & Colquitt, 2004). Hence, procedures for the distribution of resources for flexible work should be documented and practised, taking into consideration of equity and merit principles.

Conclusion

In summary, this study showed that context-specific stressors and high job demand placed exceptional pressures on professional employees and enhanced their perception of WFC. A path model which examines the mediation and moderation effects simultaneously was developed in the current study. Professional service employees experienced several context-specific stressors, which impacted on their job demands and subsequently, WFC. Work social support was found to partially mediate the effect of context-specific stressors on WFC. It is crucial for employers to constantly ensure these employees do not suffer the negative consequences of context-specific stressors in performing their duties.

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