

Work-Family Practices in Academia: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract

Work-family issues are said to affect the majority of employees in most professions, but there is a lack of information on these issues regarding employees in academic institutions. Related to this, are the suggestions that work-family practices can help employees achieve a better work-family balance. This qualitative study of a New Zealand academic institution explored these issues with a group of academic staff and a group of general staff. Overall, there were strong similarities amongst all employees regarding work-family issues, with the major issue being childcare, although eldercare issues were also raised. However, there were striking differences between academic and general staff when it came to utilising work-family practices. The university offered flexitime, and this was almost unanimously mentioned as a useful practice to help balance work-family issues by all interviewed. Despite these supportive comments, there were major differences between frequency and freedom of use.

Academic staff noted that they used flexitime very frequently (on average, 2-3 times a week) to better balance their work-family commitments. They also noted they could use it for long time periods, and were able to utilise as they needed it, reporting they enjoyed the control they had over its use. General staff, however, were able to utilise flexitime far less often (averaging 2-3 times a month), and were particularly mindful of having less freedom than academic staff, with their usage always having to be authorised by their manager. Further, discrepancies were uncovered between general staff usage, which indicated the role of their supervisor in allowing flexitime was a significant impediment to its usage and ultimately its ability to help work-family balance.

Introduction

Tertiary institutions in New Zealand are facing increasingly competitive environments, with both academic and general staff facing increasing volume and complexity in workloads. Further, the recruitment and retention of valuable human resources is an issue for all New Zealand firms, including academic institutions. The stress this plays on the workforce has become increasingly apparent, with New Zealand legislation drawing specific attention to 'stress and fatigue' as a workplace hazard for employers to be mindful of (Health and Safety in Employment Act Amendment, 2003). Another issue that has gained importance and attention in New Zealand has been work-life balance. The New Zealand Department of Labour (2004) identified that "work life balance is not a 'one size fits all issue. It's meaning for people changes at different stages throughout life, and often in response to milestones during the course of life". Clearly, there is a need to examine work-family issues in academic institutions, and explore ways institutions can use work-family practices as a way of providing greater work-family balance. Consequently, this paper explores the types of conflict reported by a sample of New Zealand academic and general staff and investigates the role that flexitime can play in greater achievement of work-family balance.

Work-Family Issues

Supporters have noted that work and family issues have become increasingly important for organizations to consider (e.g. Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995). The reasons these issues have garnered greater attention is due to a number of factors. While these factors do focus upon women, they clearly also relate to their male counterparts. These factors include the increased participation rates of working women and mothers, the rising numbers of dual-career couples, an increasing number of working single-parent families, and the enlargement of, and associated care of, the elderly population (Milliken, Martins and Morgan, 1998; Goodstein, 1994, 1995; Morgan and Milliken, 1992). These changes have been echoed around the world including the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand.

These factors have lead to increased pressures on employees, and in response, organizations have offered a number of HR practices to aid in bettering work-family balance. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) defined work-family balance as "cutting back on work to spend more time with the family" (p. 511). Kofodimos (1993) suggested it was in an employee's best interest to achieve good work-family balance. Specifically, work-family practices (also known as family-friendly or work-life practices) have been recognised as allowing employees greater balance of their increasingly complex work and family demands (Goodstein, 1994; Judge, Boudreau and Bretz, 1994; Osterman, 1995). This area of research deserves greater attention because managing these issues and the resulting conflict between work and family has been recognised as a critical challenge for firms all over the world (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

Work-Family Conflict & Hypotheses

Burley (1995) suggested that an explicit type of conflict with implications for understanding the new workplace demographics, including dual-career couples, is work-family conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role" (p. 77). In their seminal work,

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) suggested that more attention is warranted regarding the conflict employees experience between major roles in their lives, including work and family. Consequently, work-family conflict refers to conflict between an employee's work and family responsibilities (Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Burke, 1988). While clearly not all employees will find issue with conflict from their family lives (e.g. those without dependents), the literature clearly does focus on the two domains of work and family, and we follow accordingly here.

Work-family conflict can be seen as reflecting the overall goodness-of-fit between the major roles of an employee (e.g. work and family), and as such, this conflict can be a major source of stress on employee's well being (Frone, Barnes, & Farrell, 1994). Work-family conflict has been linked to a multitude of negative outcomes. These include: heightened psychological distress (Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996; Hughes & Galinsky, 1994; MacEwan & Barling, 1994), lowered life satisfaction and job satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), poor physical health (Frone et al., 1996; Thomas & Ganster, 1995), and increased alcohol and cigarette use (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1993; Frone et al., 1994; Frone et al., 1996). As such, it can be seen there is a plethora of evidence support the detrimental effects that work-family conflict can have on employees. This further heightens the importance of studying this phenomenon.

There are a variety of pressures that can produce work-family conflict (Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk, 2000). These pressures have been categorized according to three major sources: (1) time-based, (2) strain-based, and (3) behaviour based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The following section briefly describes these sources and develops hypotheses relating to the changing demographics noted above and these work-family conflict sources in an academic setting. Greenhaus et al. (2000) stated that "time-based conflict is a common type of work-family conflict" (p. 290), which is consistent with excessive work time and schedule conflict dimensions (Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980) and role overload (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Greenhaus et al. (2000) stated "strain-based conflict exists when the strain produced within one role affects experiences in another" (p. 291). This is also known as spillover, where "stress experienced in one domain of life results in stress in another domain for the same individual" (Westman, 2001, p. 717). Causes of strain-based conflict include long working hours, extensive travel, frequent overtime, and inflexible work schedules, marital status, age of children, family size, and spouses/partners in responsible employment (Greenhaus et al., 2000). Finally, behaviour-based conflict is when behaviour that is effective and accepted in one role, becomes unacceptable and inappropriate in another role (Greenhaus et al., 2000). For example, Schein (1973) noted that managers are expected to be objective, self-reliant, detached and aggressive, which might be inappropriate at home.

We suggest employees with greater work roles, for example, department managers and chairperson, staff with additional teaching loads, and staff involved with large research projects, will report higher time-based conflict. Similarly, we suggest that employees with dependents (e.g. children, elderly) will similarly report greater time-based conflict. Likewise, we suggest employees with more complex work and family roles will report more strain-based conflict. Finally, we suggest that those in higher positions (e.g. managers and chairpersons) will likely be the only ones potentially subjected to issues relating changing behaviour. This leads to our first set of research questions.

Hypothesis 1: Employees with more work/family roles will report higher time-based conflict.

Hypothesis 2: Employees with more complex work/family roles will report higher strain-based conflict.

Hypothesis 3: Employees with managerial roles will report higher behaviour-based conflict.

Flexitime & Hypotheses

The present study focuses on a single work-family practice (flexitime) in a New Zealand academic institution. While previous work-family studies have been set exclusively in academia (e.g. Grover, 1991), they are a rare setting. However, the examination of flexible scheduling has been well explored in other settings. For example, Thomas and Ganster (1995) found nurse use of flexible schedules has led to greater control, which in turn reduced conflict between work and family issues. Similarly, Saltzstein, Ting, and Saltzstein (2001) found work-family practices such as flexible and compressed schedules predicted job satisfaction. Marchese, Bassham, and Ryan (2002) asserted that flexitime might reduce work-family conflict, through greater flexibility in scheduling. They also noted that while it is linked positively with job attitudes, a downside is that it may not be applicable to some jobs and can cause scheduling problems. While Major, Klein, and Ehrhart (2002) also explored schedule flexibility, it was not found to moderate work-family conflict. In the present paper, we focus upon flexitime and test its potential positive effects on the ability of academic staff to balance their work and family roles. This focus on flexitime is appropriate given that it is among the most common work-family practices offered in the public sector (Durst, 1999), and is similarly common in the New Zealand public sector.

Flexitime is a work-family practice that typically allows employees to have flexibility in their start and finish times, while still remaining within their total work hours (typically 37.5 hours per week in New Zealand academic institutions). Thus, an employee might start work late to help get children off to school, and make this up by working late, or having a shorter break for lunch. It has been widely suggested that users of flexitime, through the ability to provide greater work and family role balance, will experience fewer issues regarding work and family/life, and in response, report greater job satisfaction, commitment, and performance. However, as noted above, whether use of flexitime is available for all, and hence, whether the potential benefits of flexitime are shared universally amongst all employees is an area that needs further exploration (Marchese et al., 2002), and this is the focus of the following hypotheses. We suggest that employees with greater access to flexitime will achieve greater work-family balance. Similarly, employees with greater control to their use of flexitime will achieve greater balance; because they won't have to continually seek authority from someone else regard its use. This leads to our second set of research questions.

Hypothesis 4: Employees with greater access to flexitime will report greater work-family balance.

Hypothesis 5: Employees with greater freedom regarding self-usage of flexitime will report greater work-family balance.

Finally, work-family practices have been linked to greater job outcomes. Using social exchange theory, studies have shown that work-family practices like flexitime can lead to positive job outcomes (e.g. Haar & Spell, 2004; Lambert, 2000). Social exchange theory is about shared exchanges (Dyne & Ang, 1998), unlike economic exchange, which relates to the exchange of money for labour. This social exchange leads to ambiguity regarding 'payment', which Blau (1964) asserted is not known in advance of the exchange. Consequently, offering flexitime may lead to potential benefits or it may not. Nevertheless, social exchange theory does suggest that recipients of a benefit (e.g. employees given flexitime) should feel

compelled to reciprocate with felt obligations (Gouldner, 1960), and this might involve more positive outcomes. Consequently, employees might value flexitime if it enhances their work-family balance and thus reciprocate with enhanced job outcomes like commitment, turnover, and support. This leads to our last research question.

Hypothesis 6: Employees with greater access and freedom towards using flexitime will report greater job outcomes.

Method

This qualitative study is set in a New Zealand university. Interviews were conducted with two groups from the academic institution, with ten academic and ten general staff members. Each group had a range of gender and age to ensure variety. Similarly, there were a range of staff including managers and those in high positions within the institution. The aim of the interviews was to:

1. Capture a general consensus of work-family conflict issues amongst staff,
2. Determine who was using flexitime and how often,
3. Determine what effect flexitime had on work-family balance,
4. Determine what effect access and freedom had on flexitime use and subsequently, work-family balance.
5. Determining any differences between academic and general staff

We purposefully separated the two employee groups to allow for any potential differences between employee types to be captured. Further, each researcher (one academic and one general staff) conducted interviews with each respective group. This separation was done to reduce the potential for comments to be ‘with held’ due to interviews being conducted from someone from a ‘different’ employee group. Where needed, follow up interviews were conducted one on one to ensure that all aspects from respondents were captured.

It was felt the most viable approach to the discursive study of work-family conflict and flexitime usage was through narratives (Reissman, 1993). Brown (1990) suggested that gathering and interpreting narratives can serve as an opportunity for uncovering organizational values, and this should readily apply towards flexitime. Many authors note that narratives are the fundamental organizing instrument through which humans perceive the world (Ward, 1985), and thus would be appropriate for understanding how employees perceive work-family conflict and flexitime. Further, narrative studies have also been useful in illuminating employees’ behaviour (Tompkins & Cheney, 1983).

Results & Discussions

Overall, there was strong evidence of work-family conflict amongst two of the three classification offered by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985). Time-based and strain-based conflict appeared to be strongly reported by those with childcare and eldercare commitments. Typical comments are “*It can be a challenge trying to be everywhere at the same time. My child wants me at school events, but if I’m teaching, that’s simply impossible*”, and “*Balancing my work with children doing multiple activities like sports, dance, and drama, means I get stretched pretty thin*”.

Other respondents noted the pressures of elderly parents. Two comments made were *“My father is coming to live with me, and that’s going to be a challenge. What if something happens while I’m at work?”* and *“I take my elderly parent up to the hospital, as they can’t drive. Sometimes, its hard fitting these appointments in with work, because when offered you have really got to take them”*.

Employees without dependents were less likely to report the same kind of demands or issues/strains. This is typified by the following quote. *“My life is simple. I do my work, and then go home. Without kids, I don’t have the same demands as my colleagues”*.

While childcare and eldercare were often mentioned, other role demands were also highlighted, although far less often. One respondent with a lifestyle block noted the following challenge. *“It can be hard when work requires extra time or travel away from home. But they can’t help look after my kids or the animals. We’re expected to just ‘manage’ these aspects”*.

While overall there was support for time-based and strain-based conflict, there were few supportive comments regarding anyone feeling behaviour-based conflict from **any** employee, including managers. Most employees seemed to think this wasn’t a major issue with their work or job. In conclusion, there was strong support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, with employees with greater and more complex work and family roles reporting time and strain-based conflicts more often and to a higher degree. However, there was no support for Hypothesis 3, with no employees reporting any real form of behaviour-based conflict.

Overall, there was strong support for using flexitime amongst both groups of employees. However, analysis showed clear distinctions between the two employee groups regarding access to flexitime and freedom to use flexitime as required. Overall, academic staff reported great access, freedom and autonomy in using flexitime, where as general staff reported less freedom and autonomy in choosing when to use flexitime and what for, than academic staff. This is highlighted by the following comment from an academic. *“I use flexitime ALL the time. Everyday I use it! I enjoy having the freedom to come and go as I choose”*. Compare that comment to the following from a general staff member. *“I love the flexitime, but I also know that I can’t use it all the time, and if it’s for any sizeable time period, I must consult my boss”*. This clearly highlights major differences in access and freedom. When probed further, the general staff member estimated they would use flexitime a few times a month, which contrasts dramatically from the everyday use by the academic staff.

While both groups of employees reported flexitime aided their ability to manage work and family/life issues, the ability to achieve greater work-family balance was reported more by academic staff than general staff. Further, academics reported using flexitime numerous times every week, and noted that flexitime allowed them to be more creative and aided productivity. However, general staff reported less frequent use of flexitime, and this was further exacerbated by individual managers either encouraging or discouraging flexitime usage, which was not noted by academics. Consequently, there is support for Marchese et al. (2002) assertion that flexitime may not be usable by all employees, and thus not be evenly enjoyed by all employees. The following quotes typify this.

Academic staff comments: *“I like flexitime and take it as a given. It helps me so much in being able to finish early to pick up my son and continue working from home, rather than having to take my son into work, which would distract me and everyone else. So, it definitely aids my work-family balance”*, and *“Yes, flexitime makes my life a whole lot easier! I don’t know what I’d do without it!”*

General staff comments: *“Every now and then I’ll use flexitime when I have to take my daughter to an appointment, but really, I try to schedule these things to be the least disruptive for my job and my boss. So, sometimes it aids my work-family balance – but only when I can use it”,* and *“When I get to use it, it definitely makes my life easier. However, I don’t feel I get to use it anywhere near as often as I’d like. That said, that’s my job – to be here for people”*.

Importantly, this last respondent also highlights the context within which these comments are made. While academic staffs have much less contact time with students, this is often not the case with general staff. Further, it appears the specific job requirements do create or limit the way in which a work-family practice like flexitime can be used, which is an important aspect to consider. Overall, these findings provide support for Hypotheses 4 and 5.

When it came to the benefits of flexitime, the distinction between academic and general staff was also followed into positive job attitudes. Academics reported a strong enjoyment of flexitime and while this reflected in comments of commitment and support, it was also apparent that academics took the use of flexitime for granted and the majority noted that this was common in all academic institutions, thus limiting its ability to leverage reciprocity and felt obligations under social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964). However, comments were still enhanced, as shown from these positive comments. *“Yeah, using the flexitime makes life easier and it’ll definitely keep me here. Or at least, within an institution that lets me use it like I do”,* and *“I really like the support from the institution that it (flexitime) provides. It makes the job so much better!”*

While general staff were similar in their praise for flexitime, they differed markedly from the academic staff due to inability to use flexitime as much as they liked, or because they had to go through a supervisor/manager for permission, which many felt academic staff didn’t need to do. These factors lead to some comments about inequities and highlighted a problem with job roles where flexitime and freedom to work flexible hours are not always possible with some jobs. Further, general staff understood that flexitime was an uncommon practice in the private sector, and as such, any use was better than no use. *“I know I’m lucky to get to use it at all, but more often – even just the ability to use it – would be nicer”*.

However, it was clearly apparent that for some general staff the lack of consistency in the application of flexitime between other general staff and their managers was an issue they felt the institution needed to examine. This was because some readily acknowledged their manager was very good at allowing flexitime use while others were not, and clearly, those who felt more constrained were less likely to report enhanced outcomes about flexitime and the institution. This provides support for Hypothesis 6.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the changing demographics associated with the rise in work-family conflict were supported in the present study. Overall, employees with multiple and complex work and family roles, reported greater time-based and strain-based conflict. There was little difference between academic and general staff, indicating that the outcomes of the many different demographic changes existing in the workplace today (e.g. dual-career couples with multiple dependents), means that work-family conflict is a reality for all employees, irrespective of job type. However, there was no support for behaviour-based conflict at all, indicating that this type of conflict might be specific to certain job types (e.g. soldiers in the military). This finding is important too because it shows that among respondents, managers and those in higher positions are able to manage their role behaviours between work and their family.

Overall, the ability of flexitime to help employees better manage their work-family balance was supported, as was its ability to encourage greater outcomes (e.g. support perceptions) from employees. Consequently, flexitime appears to be a useful work-family practice with practical benefits for employees. Importantly, while flexitime was seen as almost a 'right' by academic staff, this didn't overly negate its ability to encourage reciprocation, with most academic staff reporting enthusiastically on the practices. However, as cautioned by some authors, the adoption and application of work-family practices may not always be straight forward, and this warning was supported in the present study, with how flexitime is managed in operation by managers being particularly concerning for general staff, due to the major variability between support. This highlights an area of concern for the organization, and provides further encouragement for examining how work-family practices are operationalized to ensure their potential benefits are fully maximised. Overall, the present study provides strong support for university staff experiencing work-family issues as with other employees around the world. Further, the work-family practice of flexitime does appear to be a key practice for improving the work-family balance of employees, albeit, with academic staff enjoying greater freedom than general staff, although, this should be seen as a reflection of differences between job types.

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