15th IIRA World Congress

Abstract for Track 5: Work, Family and Community

What Causes Employees to Use Work-Life Balance Programs: the Role of Culture, Delegation, High Performance Work Systems, and Communication

Jing Wang
Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources
University of Toronto

Employers offer a range of work-life balance programs, such as job sharing, on-site daycare, and flexible work time to encourage employees to balance their work and personal lives. Eby et al. (2005), however, revealed that just offering these programs may be of limited value and that employees may not use these programs at all. Many factors will influence an employee's decision on whether to utilize work-life balance practices (WLBPs). Some employees might not be able to find suitable coworkers to share their job, others might not be able to afford part-time work, and yet others may fear negative career consequences if they take family leave (Budd and Mumford 2006).

Some researchers have recognized the importance that WLBP usage has in affecting employee job satisfaction, commitment, and corporate citizenship (Thompson et al., 1999). Yet despite this recognition, little research has been done to explore this important issue. To fill this gap, this study uses a national survey and investigates the factors that may help employees use WLBPs. The possible factors include a culture of long work hours, the existence of communication programs, High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), and the delegation of authority.

The data used in this study are drawn from the Workplace and Employee Survey (WES), which is developed and administered by Statistics Canada. WES is a nationally representative survey of workplaces and their employees. It is a longitudinal survey which followed sample organizations from 1999 to 2005 and followed responses from individual employees within the chosen organizations for two years. Separate questionnaires were given to management and to employees within each organization and the responses by both groups complement each other to provide comprehensive business unit information on diverse aspects of human resources and industrial relations from both employer and employee perspectives. The data used in this paper is a 2003 workplace survey and 2004 employee survey. The respondents for the 2003 workplace survey are 6565 business units out of an estimated population of 723,787. For the 2004 employee survey, the respondents are 20,834 employees out of an estimated population of 2,119,794.

All independent variables such as communication programs, HPWS, and the delegation of authority were taken from the 2003 employer part of the survey. All dependent variables and all control variables such as length of time on the job, job title, position, employee status, union membership, and the number and ages of dependent children, were taken from the 2004 employee part of the survey.

This study used a multilevel logistic regression in which the dependent variable is a binary variable indicating whether or not an employee uses WLBPs. Variables such as the number of years on the job, job title, etc. were treated as control variables on the employee level. The independent variables at the workplace level are the amount of communication, the delegation of authority, the average number of work hours, and the adoption of HPWSs.

The results show that employees are less likely to use WLBPs when there is a culture within the company of working long hours. Managers set the tone for the company and if they are visibly working long hours then workers will get the idea that those who work from early morning to late at night are seen as valuable and committed. Employees may feel reluctant to use WLBPs because they fear their careers will suffer if they don't follow the manager's rules (Hammonds, 1997).

Second, employees are more likely to use WLBPs when their supervisors delegate power and authority to their workers. Bailyn (1993) argued that a central requirement for work-life balance is that employees have a high level of discretion and control over the conditions of their work. Employees will not use WLBPs if these programs cannot meet their needs and are not what they want. Workers will be most likely to participate in WLBPs programs if have a say in designing them.

Third, employees are more likely to use WLBPs when their companies adopt HPWS. Employees believe that their company is highly committed to them and is willing to invest in them when their company adopts some HPWS such as providing substantial training and career development opportunities, and enrolling them in profit sharing programs. Therefore, they are not likely to fear retaliation from their supervisors or worry that their careers will be adversely affected if they use the WLBPs that their companies offer.

Finally, those who are employed by companies with good communication programs are more likely to use WLBPs. Many employees do not use WLBPs simply because they are not aware that certain programs exist. Communication programs can raise awareness of the currently available WLBPs and they can spread the word of fellow employees who are successfully using these programs. Communication is a two-way street, and corporations should use effective communication to *listen* to their employees as well as to tell their employees about existing programs. More people will use WLBPs if corporations use employee surveys and exit interviews to gather information about the types of programs that

their employees need.

Reference:

Bailyn, L. (1993). *Breaking the Mold*. New York: The Free Press.

Budd, J. W. & Mumford, K. A. (2006). Family-friendly work practices in Britain: availability and perceived accessibility. *Human Resources Management* 45(1), 23-42

Eby, L., Casper, W., Lockwood, A., Bordeaux, C. & Brinley, A. (2005). Work and family research in IO/OB: content analysis and review of the literature (1980-2002). *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 66 124-197.

Hammonds, K. H. (1997), Work and family: Business Week's second survey of family-friendly corporate policies. *Business Week*, 96-99, 102-4.

Thompson, C. A., Beauvais, L. L. & Lyness, K. S. (1999). When work-family benefits are not enough: the influence of work-family culture on benefit utilization, organizational attachment, and work-family conflict. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 54 392-415.