Balancing Work and Family or Balancing the Books?
Managerial and Employee Responses to Parental Leave Policies

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In this paper we examine the stated organisational rationale for the introduction or enhancement of parental leave policies and link this with management and employee responses to such policies. By so doing we provide a dynamic and nuanced understanding of the operation of parental leave policies within organisations.

The introduction and adoption of family-friendly policies in organisations in theorised in different ways. Applebaum, Bailey, Berg and Kalleberg (2004) argue that there are two main theoretical perspectives informing the analyses of why companies adopt family-friendly policies. The first is the rational choice perspective, associated with efficiency and business case arguments. Common to this view are firm-specific cost-benefit analyses of work and family policies. This may include financial demonstration that the benefits of employee attraction and retention outweigh the costs of introducing paid maternity leave. The second is the institutional perspective, associated with social pressures or professional norms that inform and influence the decisions of managers to introduce family friendly policies, even when they may not necessarily make 'business sense'. The adoption of these policies in one organisation potentially leads to the spread of policies and the development of sectoral standards and a pattern of 'institutional isomorphism'. De Cieri, Holmes, Abbot and Pettit (2005) make a strong business case argument for Australian organisations to adopt work-life policies in order for them to meet their human resource needs, giving credence to the rational choice theory. In contrast, Charlesworth and Probert (2005) showed that the business case perspective was often only part of the reason for the policy's introduction. Once in place, however, organisational barriers often impede employee access and use of family-friendly polices. These barriers have been variously identified as cultural antipathy, supervisory opposition, negative career consequences, high work time expectations and adverse organisational and peer communications (Budd and Mumford 2006; Haas, Allard and Hwang, 2002; Kirby and Krone, 2002; Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999).

The case studies form the middle tier of the three-tier Parental Leave in Australia Study (Whitehouse, Baird, Diamond and Hosking 2006). The data for this paper were collected from eight organisations across the public and private sectors, ranging in size from 300 employees to over 30,000 employees and with a variety of parental leave policies. In collecting the data the researchers liaised closely with the organisations over sustained periods of time. The case studies draw on principles from the Collaborative Interactive Action Research method (Rapoport and Bailyn 2002) with two key research questions: (1) How is the 'ideal worker' perceived in this organisation? (2) How does the use of parental leave interact with this 'ideal worker' construction? Data collection included formal methods (examination of policy

documents and reports, individual, email and telephone interviews, on-site focus groups and an in-house researcher for periods of two to six weeks and longer) and less formal methods (group discussions, informal one-on-one discussions, email, site visits and observations). Researchers interviewed managers in IR/human resource management, equal opportunity and diversity, operations and line positions, as well as female and male employees at various levels in the organisations. The formal interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed; for the less formal interactions, extensive notes were taken by the researchers. The data from all the cases were then collated and categorised according to organisation and also according to theme.

The key findings relate to the patterns of leave use and to the intra-organisational dynamics of leave use. Parental leave policies vary markedly across the organisations but are overwhelmingly accessed by females, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour at home and work. They were used more by mid-level white collar employees than higher level or blue collar employees, reinforcing organizational and occupational status differences. The female leave users were both work and family focused and made private adjustments in order to combine their dual roles. Their ability to use the polices was enhanced by employee agency, (determined by career and job security, union representation, gender and role autonomy) and constrained by the organisational norm of the 'ideal worker', traditionally male, unencumbered by care. In terms of the intra-organisational dynamics, complex interactions between supervisors and employees and parental leave policies with other policies (pay structures, staffing, accounting methods) occurred. 'Balancing the books' was a crucial consideration for supervisors, but one which impeded the utilization of work and family policies for many employees. Despite this, employees often accommodated and accepted the organizational requirements over their own work-family balance.

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