

USING FOCUS GROUPS TO EXAMINE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EMPLOYEES' DECISIONS TO USE FAMILY FRIENDLY PRACTICES

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Abstract

This study uses qualitative data gathered from focus group interviews to investigate the factors that influence employees' decisions to use or not use family friendly policies in a university setting. The focus group data identified a number of barriers that limit the use of family friendly policies including perceived career implications, high workloads, peer and management attitudes, and administrative processes. This study reinforces the notion that organizational commitment for a family friendly work environment is not merely about providing policies for their symbolic value, but is also about creating a workplace culture that supports and encourages the use of policies.

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USING FOCUS GROUPS TO EXAMINE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EMPLOYEES' DECISIONS TO USE FAMILY FRIENDLY PRACTICES

This study uses qualitative data gathered from focus group interviews to investigate the factors that influence employees' decisions to use or not use family friendly policies in a university setting. Many studies have considered the barriers for implementing work-family programs in organizations (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1997; Kropf, 1997; Pringle & Tudhope, 1997) but it is also important to understand the factors that affect employees' use of family friendly policies from the perspective of those who work within the organization. Studies of work-family issues that have used a qualitative research design using focus groups have been few (Freedman, Litchfield, & Warfield, 1995; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Mackey Jones & McKenna, 2002). The use of focus groups has the advantage that respondents (in this case, university employees) were able to give their insights into the factors that affected employees' use of the family friendly practices.

A comprehensive review of the literature found limited research examining the direct link between family friendly policies and their use by academic and general staff in Australian universities. Family friendly policies are defined as "arrangements to support employees faced with balancing the competing demands of work and family in today's fast-paced complex environment" (Newman & Mathews, 1999), p.142). Research literature examining issues that affect their use in other cultural and organizational contexts provides findings that may have implications for higher education. For example, Newman and Mathews (1999) examined the utilization of family-friendly workplace policies within the United States Federal Government and concluded that considerable barriers affect the overall implementation of such policies. In addition, empirical data obtained from the finance sector by Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) found that the social context affects use of these types of policies. Their study explored institutional theory and concluded that organizations often adopt family friendly policies for their symbolic value in order to receive "external legitimacy rather than for substantive reasons" (p 814).

Drago, Crouter, Wardell, and Willits (2001) conducted a study of faculty at Pennsylvania State University and concluded that understanding factors associated with the use of family friendly policies is important in a practical sense. Although the intention of their research was to investigate the ability of faculty to meet commitments to family, Drago et al. argued that unless changes in organizational culture, climate, day to day practices, and expectations are addressed, the most progressive work/family policies are likely be ignored by academic faculty.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather analytical information as to what factors influenced employees to access family friendly practices. According to Lee, Mitchell and Sablynski (1999), qualitative data (e.g., focus group interviews) are suited to description, interpretation and explanation, whereas quantitative data are suited to prevalence, generalizability, and calibration. The focus group response format provided respondents with the opportunity to generate their responses in relation to factors that affected employees accessing work and family policies.

Factors affecting use of family friendly policies: Higher education context

The demands of economic globalization, escalating competition and reduced government funding have affected the Australian higher education sector over the past fifteen years and has led to many Australian universities adopting market driven principles in relation to their staffing practices and policies (Burton, 1997; Lafferty, 1997). Raabe (1997) suggests that similar to managers in the corporate arena, academic administrators have become interested in the 'contribution' of various work-family policies towards improving faculty recruitment and retention, as well as supporting productivity and professional development. Therefore, it is not surprising that universities are now viewing family friendly policies as a way of not only attracting and retaining high quality staff but also a means of achieving a competitive edge (Mathews-Mead & Reinicke, 2002)

However, findings from Bailyn (1993) contend that although higher education institutions historically appear to offer certain positives for career and family friendly life (e.g., on site childcare), the demands of academic careers have typically led to longer hours of work. According to White (2000) this situation has arisen due to

the emphasis, over the past five years, on research, PhD status and elevated administrative tasks for academic staff resulting in the erosion of the benefits of flexibility to accommodate work and family.

Drago et al. (2001) concluded that in the higher education sector "the use of work/family policies does not immediately flow from their existence on paper" (p 2). Therefore, despite academic institutions providing on-site child care and a range of family friendly policies, the question of use of policies to support staff with meeting their work and family obligations is crucial. Broadly, the literature suggests that employees' use of family friendly policies are weakened and remain under-utilized by a complex web of interlocking systemic, social and institutional factors (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Gerson & Jacobs, 2001; Senge, 1992).

Similarly, Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) stated, "...despite formal policies and programs designed to help employees balance work and family, un-supportive work cultures may undermine their use and effectiveness" (p39). This view is consistent with research by Raabe (1997) who determined the availability of 12 work family policies and their use by academic staff at 300 academic institutions across the United States. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of utilization of five of the policies offered including job assistance for spouses, expansion of time for achieving tenure, accommodative scheduling, tenure for part time faculty and job sharing. Results confirmed that some of the five arrangements were fairly common practice in some institutions. However, Raabe (1997) concluded that the perceived subtle resistance from management eroded accessibility and use. This is consistent with Jenner (1994) who argues written policies are not enough, if the corporate culture fails to support or 'legitimize' their use by staff.

Newman et al.'s (1999) study aimed to understand the reasons for the low use of family friendly workplace policies and programs within the U.S. Federal Government. A survey was sent to 14 Government departments to obtain information on the identification of inherent obstacles to utilization of family friendly policies. From their research, Newman et al. (1999) determined that policies remained under-utilized in any context. This included part time work, flexible work schedules and compressed working hours. The organizational barriers identified in their study include mistrust by management; workaholic culture; limited communication and training; stretching scarce resources; and an incompatibility with job design.

A lean infrastructure and elevated workloads can also affect employees' ability to use family friendly policies (Kropf 2001). Kropf examines the way organizational structures and systems affect the use of voluntary part time arrangements by professionals in four companies with findings suggesting that without additional resources to support employees, flexible arrangements are difficult to maintain or even afford.

Perhaps even more enlightening is a study by Eaton (2001) who explored the link between workplace flexibility policies with perceived "usability" and commitment to the organization. In particular, Eaton examines the extent that employees feel free to utilize "theoretically available" policies, either informally or formally. Eaton found that employees who feel free to use policies are likely to report positive commitment towards the organization. Eaton found that if employees find policies to be useable, perceived productivity for all employees, male and female, is more positive.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather information from academic and administrative employees within a large Australian university about factors that influenced their use of the policies the organization provided. The key question addressed in the focus groups was: *Is there anything that would discourage you from accessing a work-life policy or imitative?*

Case Study Organization and Context

The organization is a large Australian university with eight campuses including one in Malaysia and one in South Africa. It has 2,269 full-time equivalent academic staff and 2,477 general administrative staff. The university caters for over 48,000 students with undergraduate students making up 75% of enrolments, followed by 19.4% enrolled in postgraduate coursework, and 5.7% in higher degree research. It has programs in a vast array of areas and has ten faculties (Art & Design, Arts, Business & Economics, Education, Information Technology, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Pharmacy, Science). One of the aims of the university is to adopt staffing policies and management approaches, which create an environment attractive to high achievers, and establishes it as the preferred employer amongst Australian Universities. The University's

Work Life Family Strategy was founded on the premise of competitive advantage by retaining committed and productive employees. The policy commits the University to providing policies and services that enable staff and students to successfully combine their pursuit of employment and education with family responsibilities. The University recognizes that family responsibilities are industrial and educational matters, which are not confined to social or private realms of life but are the concern of the university community as a whole. Table 1 lists the range of formal family friendly policies offered by the university. Many studies have found that large public sector organizations (e.g. Australian universities) are likely to provide family friendly policies (Bardoel, Moss, Smyrnios, & Tharenou, 1999; den Dulk, 2001; Ingram & Simons, 1995).

Table 1: Family Friendly Policies Offered by the University

Leave Types	Flexible Work Options	Support Services
48/52 leave	Flexible starting and finishing times	Family and childcare service
Annual leave for dependants	Job share	Housing service
Compassionate leave	Compressed working hours	Salary packaging
Dependent sick leave/family leave	Part-time work	Sports and recreation
Extended compassionate leave	Time off in lieu	Staff development unit
Leave loading substitution	Work from home	University community services
Long service leave		University Health services
Long service leave ½ pay		
Long service leave double pay		
Maternity leave (paid 12 weeks)		
Maternity unpaid < 6 months		
Maternity unpaid > 6 months		
Paternity leave		
Paternity leave unpaid		
Special paid leave		

METHOD

In order to gather information from academic and administrative employees about factors that influenced their use of the policies, nine focus groups were conducted. According to Krueger (1988) focus groups are a means of collecting qualitative data through group discussions about a selected topic. Walker (1985) emphasized that, because qualitative techniques are not concerned with measurement, they tend to be less structured than quantitative methods and therefore more responsive to the needs of the respondents and the nature of the subject matter. Qualitative research design tends to yield large volumes of exceedingly rich data obtained from a limited number of individuals (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The use of focus groups was particularly appropriate for this study because it allowed employees to identify the critical elements for discussion that are less likely to be elicited from surveys or individual interviews.

In order to recruit participants, Faculty Affirmative Action Committees (6), Information Technology Services Division and Central Administration were approached to invite academic and general staff to participate in a Work Family Focus Group. The ten focus groups comprised of male and female academic and general staff (including supervisors) with 87 (58 females, 18 males) staff members attending from three campuses. Group sizes ranged from 5 to 12 participants. Due to time constraints none of the focus groups included trades and services staff. All participants were self nominated and remained anonymous. They were informed that the results would be summarized as a total group and used for research purposes with a written report compiled for management. At each focus group, one of the researchers acted as facilitator of the discussion questions, while an assistant took notes. Each group was tape-recorded.

Following the final focus group, both researchers independently analyzed the information obtained from the focus groups and sorted the data into themes. In line with Lee et al.'s (1999) suggestions, the two

researchers undertook a process of agreeing on thematic content and in the few cases where there was a discrepancy, the researchers reviewed that data to agree on the thematic content.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged from coding participant answers to the question, Is there anything that would discourage you from accessing a work-life policy or imitative?

Workloads

Workloads were identified as a prime inhibitor for accessing family friendly policies. In particular many academic staff reported feeling too stressed and oppressed by their overwhelming workloads to be able to access family friendly policies. This was exacerbated by a perception by academic staff that they were under continual pressure to take on additional administrative duties. Similarly, some administrative staff perceived they were expected to work longer hours without pay. One participant reported that taking time off only increased her stress levels due to the build up of work when she returned.

What benefit are they (sic. family friendly policies) when workloads are heavy, restricting the ability to access blocks of leave.

or

Myself and another staff member used substitute for annual leave loading but ended up working the days we were supposed to be on leave.

Career implications

Many staff reported a perception that the use of family friendly policies would have a negative impact on their career. There was a perception that using any of the family friendly policies identified in Table 1 might be interpreted as a lack of commitment and negatively influence promotion or contract renewal. A few staff actually reported that they had been told that they can take all the family friendly options but “will not go places”. In addition, some staff reported previous use of policies would be remembered and held against the person at a later date.

I would feel too guilty to access the policies because my career would be affected having already had experience where training was denied to me due to my pregnancy.

or

People are concerned about the effect 48/52 will have on their career so continue to undertake a full-time workload, squeezing work into less time.

Influence of peers

Another strong theme that emerged from the data as to why staff might not access family friendly policies related to the influence of workplace peers. This was reflected in reluctance by some staff to inflict extra work on other staff because it might cause resentment or not being seen as a team player. Other participants noted hostility by peers and management as a contributing factor that discouraged access of policies.

To avoid resentment I negotiated with my supervisor flexible working hours and said to my peers I hope you will cooperate because I need your support.

Management attitudes

In addition, to the influence of peers on employees' willingness to avail themselves of family friendly policies, participants also identified the impact of management expectations. It was felt by some participants that some managers projected a view that "family responsibilities are your problems". Other participants reported some managers believed part-time workers do not work as hard. Many argued that management attitudes to staff accessing family friendly policies strongly influenced the confidence of workers to even negotiate to access the policies.

There is general culture that if you work long hours you are considered to be hardworking whereas if you take time out to work part time you are seen as incompetent.

or

Management view staff who use the policies as non committed.

Administrative processes

Administrative processes were also identified as a factor that discouraged staff from accessing work and family policies. Some academic staff reported that semester timetables did not allow for eight-week spaces to access 48/52 leave. This was compounded by the fact that many academic staff used the non-teaching periods to undertake their research activities. Other factors related to the software system used by the university to process staff leave. The SAP system does not register 48/52 leave so staff have to do their own calculations on how much leave they have. Some general staff reported there were difficulties in accessing flexible working hours because of operational requirements to provide face-to-face customer service.

DISCUSSION

The themes of (i.e. workloads, career implications, influence of peers, management attitudes, and administrative processes) that emerged from the focus group data have important implications for the effective implementation of family friendly policies in organizations and future research. The results of the focus groups confirm that there are a number of informal barriers for employees accessing family friendly policies that might contradict the organization's formal policy and support. It is important to be able to identify the barriers, so that a strategy can be developed to ensure staff feel free to actually use the policies.

The issue of workloads is a contentious issue in the Australian University setting as public funding to the sector has declined over a number of years and universities are required to do more with less. Workloads have become an industrial relations issue between the peak union body in the higher education sector (National Tertiary Educational Union) and universities, and as yet the focus of debate has not been concentrated on the link to work-life balance. It would appear the results of the focus groups support the conclusions of several other researchers, that family friendly policies will continue to be under-utilized, unless organizations tackle issues such as scarce resources that impact on workloads of staff.

The focus group data confirmed empirical research by Gerson and Jacobs (2001) that found even when family friendly policies are formally available, workers may conclude that taking advantage of them entails unspoken but very real costs to their careers. Gerson et al. analyzed data from the National Study of the Changing Workforce telephone survey of 3381 employed men and women in the United States and found that this perception applied to women and men. The result is also confirmed by Blair-Loy et al. (2002), whose study found that the use of work family policies hinders career advancement with more than half the respondents reporting that consistently spending long hours at work had a positive affect on their career progress.

Results from a study by Saltzstein, Ting, and Saltzstein (2001) are also validated (e.g., "... in many cases, workplace and/or societal cultures and expectations deter those most in need from ever applying for such programs", p 454). Reasons cited include less than supportive supervisors undermining the benefits of

specific programs by failing to communicate their existence and denying access and rewarding the long hours' work culture to the exclusion of personal life. In other words, negative career impact discourages the use of policies (Bailyn, 1993; Williams, 2000; Thompson et al., 1999).

In summary, the focus group data indicates that there is a perception by staff that use of the policies will be disadvantageous to their career; their workloads are often too high to be able to use them; peers and managers play an important role as to whether staff feel comfortable accessing the policy in the first place; and finally administrative processes to access the policies might not be designed for staff to easily access the policies available.

CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the notion that organizational commitment for a family friendly work environment is not merely about providing policies for their symbolic value (Blair-Loy et al., 2002). Instead, it is about creating a workplace culture that supports and encourages the use of policies. Prompted by these results, it is expected that if staff perceive the workplace culture to be non-supportive, use of family friendly policies will be low.

Implications

The present study also demonstrates the importance of communication within a large organization on the effective implementation and take up of family friendly policies. Prince (2000) identifies the importance of having infrastructure to support the use of family friendly policies highlighting the need for effective communication strategies within organizations. Prince states, "that even the best programs won't succeed if employees aren't aware of them" (p.2). A study by Kramar (1997) found that communication is a critical step in the implementation of family friendly policies. The research posits that to be truly effective, organizations need to 'carefully manage' a formal communication process in order to implement work and family policies. Strategies identified as most effective include targeted communication to a wide range of stakeholders with specific actions and responsibilities designated to particular managers.

Over the past 10 years, the demise of Government funding in Australia has impacted upon higher education and been a driver for the introduction of market driven principles. For academic staff, this has meant elevated workloads, higher expectations concerning research, PhD status and increased administrative tasks, at the same time as general staff have struggled with diminished resources and changing work processes (Probert, Ewer, & Whiting, 1998). Therefore, despite universities providing family friendly policies, increased demand on staff has eroded their overall benefit.

The focus group data confirms that the provision of family friendly policies is not enough and they remain symbolic, unless the barriers that inhibit their use are removed. The present study confirms previous research that if policies remain symbolic, they are of little value to staff. Barriers identified in this study that limit the use of family friendly policies in a university setting were perceived career implications, high workloads, peer and management attitudes, and administrative processes. The results highlight the need for the university to ensure that the use of family friendly policies does not hinder or disadvantage career progression, is supported by management at an operational level, and that information about family friendly policies is widely promoted. However, the biggest challenge for the university is to resolve systemic issues in relation to unsustainable workloads. It is likely that until this issue is resolved, the use of family friendly is likely to remain restricted.

Future Research

The focus group results and the policy implications drawn from these findings should be examined further. Given the limited and exploratory nature of this study, the conclusions drawn need to be examined further in larger scale studies of staff at other universities and different industries. Structured interviews that combine quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques should be conducted to assess whether the themes identified in the focus groups are applicable in other higher education settings. Second, future research

projects need to also include different industry settings in order to analyze whether differences exist between industry contexts with respect to the reasons identified as leading to employee decisions not to use family friendly practices.

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